

A HOUSEFUL OF
REBELS



WALTER C. RHOADES

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A HOUSEFUL OF REBELS.



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A HOUSEFUL OF REBELS

BEING AN ACCOUNT
OF THREE NAUGHTY GIRLS, AND THEIR
ADVENTURES IN FAIRYLAND.

BY

WALTER RHOADES

(Author of 'The Story of John Trevennick', etc.)

ILLUSTRATED BY

PATTEN WILSON.

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P R E F A C E.

MY DEAR ESMEÉ,

You have not forgotten the winter evenings when, perched on my knee, you listened, with a profoundly critical air, to this fairy story, long before it became a book.

Because you shewed a flattering interest in every chapter, laughed in the right places, and found no fault with it whatever (Oh! Charming critic!), and also because I have the privilege of being your father, it is to you I venture to dedicate "A Houseful of Rebels."

In doing so, however, I ask you to recall the time when this tale was acted as a play. Do you remember the rehearsals? How you were wont to lie on the hearthrug and follow each scene, sometimes peeling with merriment, sometimes with solemn face, but always with the closest attention? You remember also the performances which to you, at least, were sources of unbounded delight? But of course you do; and as each of us, in different ways, gained so much pleasure from

the play, I would ask you, not I am sure in vain, to join with me in thanking all those connected with its production, who placed at my disposal so much time and patience and talent, and who opened to you the portals of Fairyland.

When we meet Titania and her fairy people (who exist somewhere, but seem so difficult to find) we will beg that all our good wishes to these friends shall come true, so that our debt of gratitude may be paid in better coin than words.

Believe me, my dear Esmeé, to remain,

Your most obedient father,

THE AUTHOR.

XMAS, 1897.

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A HOUSEFUL OF REBELS.

CHAPTER I.

A DELIGHTFUL AFTERNOON.

"It's no use. We are locked in."

The speaker still wrestling with the door-handle, was a girl in her thirteenth year, tall and slight for her age, with dark eyes that gleamed with mingled anger and amusement.

"Anyhow, I don't care. It's fun," she continued, laughing recklessly.

"I don't care either," said her sister Lucy, a young lady of eleven, who was sitting on the table, beating a wild tattoo with her heels against its leg.

"And more do I."

This ungrammatical observation came from the youngest sister, Kitty, a merry child of nine, who, seated on the floor with her knees up to her chin, nodded like a china Mandarin.

"But you are quite sure the door is locked, Mary?" she asked.

"Quite," and Mary rattled the handle again to remove all doubts.

"As usual, Miss Harbutt has got the best of it. But never mind. We *have* been naughty this afternoon and we are not being punished for nothing. There is some comfort in that."

In making this statement, Mary spoke the truth, although there was no reason why she should have confined herself to naming any particular day.

For some time past the two elder girls had been sore trials to their governess, Miss Harbutt, and Kitty had faithfully followed their example.

They had been wilful, lazy and inclined to be disobedient, while Miss Harbutt appeared a little wanting in sympathy, so that perversity on the one side and a too strict system on the other had finally led to the three culprits being locked in the nursery until further notice. The first signs of revolt had shewn themselves at lessons in the morning, but the rebellious outbreak

occurred later in the day. Mary had been very careless indeed, and inclined to be rude, Lucy, in her demure way, became exasperatingly dense, while Kitty, as Miss Harbutt had herself complained, did nothing but fidget and giggle.

Several sharp reprimands from the governess failed to improve matters; so that after the mid-day meal, the three girls had gathered in the nursery, smarting under their wrongs and ripe for mischief.

They were discussing plans which seemed very like treason against constituted authority, when a shrill voice floated up to them from the landing below.

"Mary! Kitty! Lucy! where are you girls hiding?"

Mary went to the door and shouted back an answer:

"Here we are, Freddy. In the nursery."

This was quickly followed by a small knickerbockered boy, twin-brother to Lucy, who bounced into the room without ceremony.

"I say, you girls, Miss Harbutt has gone out for the afternoon," he commenced.

"Well, we know that," said Mary shortly.

"And mother won't be home until after bed-time," he continued.

"We know that too."

"And Cook has gone to the Crystal Palace, or somewhere, and there is only Jane at home."

"Well, what of it?" asked Kitty, with a shade of expectation in her voice.

"I've got an idea. Let us have a bachelor's party."

"Oh yes! Let's!" cried the two youngest, not quite understanding what Freddy meant, but readily falling in with any suggestion which their brother chose to make.

"But that's stupid," broke in Mary. "Bachelors are boys and grown-up men. You can't have a party all to yourself, Freddy."

"You can be boys too—just this once," suggested her brother.

"I wish we could. It is much jollier than being girls," sighed Lucy.

"Then look here. You'll find a lot of my clothes and things somewhere about. Some of 'em hanging up in the cupboard on the first landing and some of 'em are in the

drawers in my bedroom. Go and put 'em on. It will be awful fun."

For a moment the girls stood looking at each other and their brother, too overcome with the daring nature of the proposal to speak.

"But—but suppose we are caught?" gasped Lucy, with an effort.

"Who is to catch you?"

"Jane!"

"Oh! bother Jane. She is too grumpy and busy to take much notice of you. She'll think it's some fellows I've brought home from school. Besides, even if she does find out, we can easily persuade her not to split on us. That will be all right," he added impatiently.

"Suppose the things don't fit us?" queried Mary, with feminine instinct.

"They'll be dreadfully large for me," chimed in Kitty plaintively.

"Oh! It's just like girls," cried Freddy, stamping, "to try and upset everything. Of course they'll fit somehow. There are lots of suits which I've grown out of. Besides, it doesn't matter if they don't. You're not going to church in 'em."

"Only if Miss Harbutt *should* find out?" observed Lucy, suffering, not as much from qualms of conscience, as from the fear of punishment which would certainly follow such a discovery.

"You're frightened. That's what it is," said Freddy scornfully. "You would like to, but you haven't the pluck."

"Yes, we have," snapped Mary, eagerly defending the courage of her sex. "It isn't that at all."

"Yes, it is. You're frightened of Miss Harbutt. Fancy being afraid of her. I'm glad I'm not a girl."

The boy's contemptuous tones quickly removed all further scruples.

It had always seemed to the girls that the freedom from restraint, the delightful liberty granted to boys was something to be envied.

To roam about at one's own sweet will, unhampered by the presence of a governess; to play cricket and football, to spin tops and fly kites; to wear garments that did not cling round the legs; to be noisy without hindrance: in fact to do everything

forbidden to girls, appeared so perfect an existence, that even an hour of "make believe" was an experience to be seized upon at all costs.

"I'll do it, Freddy," exclaimed Mary suddenly. "I'll do it in spite of Miss Harbutt."

"And so will I!" said Lucy more demurely.

"And so will I," chirped Kitty, who followed the lead of her elder sisters as a matter of course.

"All right. Make haste, and we'll have a jolly time of it. You go and get into my things and I'll think of what we can do," cried Freddy, once more amiable.

A little fearful of venturing upon so exciting an enterprise, but filled with the spirit of mischief, the girls ran down stairs, leaving the boy to make a more sober descent.

It was a fine afternoon in May. A recent rain had left the grass damp, while the sun had not quite drawn up the rain drops which still glistened on the plants in the trim flower-beds and on the laurel hedge at the end of the lawn. Freddy strolled

up and down, now and again glancing impatiently up at the windows. The sight of a few snails and over-confident slugs had given him an idea which he was anxious to carry out without delay, so that every minute of inaction seemed an hour.

At last the French window leading into the drawing-room was cautiously opened, and three figures arrayed in jackets and knickerbockers, with caps upon their heads, came timidly into the garden. The boy walked round his sisters, who stood half ashamed and half defiant, and then went into fits of laughter.

"I don't see anything to laugh at," cried Mary indignantly. "Everything is on the right way, isn't it?"

"Ah! yes. You've put 'em on all right; but you do look so comic, I can't help laughing," and once more Freddy became convulsed in merriment. "I believe even Miss Harbutt would grin if she saw you."

"That shews you don't know anything about her," observed Lucy severely. "She would have a fit on the spot. But if your idea of a bachelor's party is to stand and

giggle all the afternoon. I don't see that there is much fun in it."

"I won't do it any more," gurgled Freddy, doing his best to suppress his mirth. "I daresay I shall get used to it soon; but tuck your hair under your caps, then you won't look such molly-coddles."

The girls hastened to do his bidding, and then eagerly requested to be told his plans for their amusement.

"I tell you what we'll do first. We'll turn the chickens into the garden. There are an awful lot of snails and slugs about, and its 'larks' to see them gobble them up."

"But they will scratch holes in the mould," observed Mary doubtfully. "Father has a lot of seeds and plants just coming up."

"Not if we keep driving them along. That is what Dad tells Joskins to do sometimes; so he'll like it."

The chicken-run was in a paddock attached to some outbuildings at the side of the house, to which spot the party ran off in noisy haste. The girls, still unpleasantly conscious of their unusual dress, kept look-

ing round anxiously, although there was no one within sight.

"You are sure, Freddy, that we do look like boys?" asked Mary, eager to be reassured on that point.

"Well, you do at a distance. But there's something about you that's girlyfied."

"Perhaps it's our hair," suggested Lucy.

"Um—yes. But there's something else," meditated her brother. "You walk as if you had petticoats on. Step out more, and stick your hands in your pockets."

In a moment the three girls were stalking along, doing their best to imitate Freddy's somewhat ungraceful 'slouch'; while their Mentor watched these endeavours, with contemptuous amusement.

"That's something like it," he said, after they had marched round the paddock. But you'll have to practise. Girls can't become boys all at once. And now for the chickens."

There was a good deal of "clucking" and fuss among the fowls when the four children invaded their domain, and it was not without some difficulty that they were

persuaded to leave the run. Indeed two hens who were each hatching a sitting of eggs, were very obstinate indeed, and it was not until Freddy had assaulted them with a switch, that they unwillingly consented to desert their nests.

The business, however, was at last accomplished, and some dozen fowls were paraded round the garden, and allowed to swallow the slimy pests which played such havoc with the tender shoots.

It was not very exciting work, and the children's attention sometimes wandered from the chickens to other objects.

"I wonder," said Kitty, who had paused to watch a bee who, half buried in a flower, was busy with its work—"I wonder if the bees take all the honey they find, back to the hive? I shouldn't. It *must* taste good, fresh out of the flower. I should eat some on the spot."

"I expect bees do that too," chimed in Lucy. "They wouldn't be so silly as to save it all up for human people. I suppose we only have their leavings."

"How jolly a bee must be," remarked

Mary, glancing at the insect, as he slowly withdrew from the bloom. "When he is hungry, he just pops into the nearest flower and there is dinner all ready; and here," she added, pointing to a leaf with curled edges, which held tiny drops of water gleaming like crystals—"here is something for him to drink. He isn't worried to behave properly at table, or put into pinafores; and it must be nice to eat out of flowers and drink from leaves," a remark to which the others readily gave their assent.

The pleasure of watching bees and butterflies, however, and keeping the chickens moving, soon palled. It struck the girls that it was not necessary to disguise themselves in Freddy's clothing for such a mild form of amusement as this, since it could have been enjoyed quite as well in petticoats. Kitty was the first to revolt.

"I'm tired of watching these greedy things. It isn't a game at all. Let us play at something."

"But you can't play at anything; that's the worst of it," said her brother.

"Yes, we can, if you'll shew us how," said Mary.

"But you never could," remarked Freddy discontentedly.

"That was because our frocks got in the way."

"Very well then. What can we do?"

"Let's—let's play at leapfrog," gasped Lucy; "I have always wanted to play that."

"Leapfrog! why you couldn't 'fly a back' if you tried for a month," exclaimed Freddy.

"Oh! couldn't I? Just stoop down and let me try."

"And get kicked on the head. Not if I know it."

"You are frightened. If I were a boy, I shouldn't be afraid of that. Besides, I won't kick you hard."

With some misgivings Freddy bent his back, while Lucy attempted to surmount the obstacle in a true boyish fashion. The result of her endeavour was to send both her brother and herself rolling on the grass amid great laughter from the two onlookers.

"It doesn't hurt, Mary. You try. We shall soon do it properly."

It was not without demur that the boy consented to be practised upon; but after

several mishaps, his sisters managed to 'fly' over him, quite easily; even Kitty, not to be outdone by her bigger sisters, taking a share in the sport.

"There! That's enough at present," said Freddy, tired of so one-sided a game, since none of the girls would become the 'post'. "It isn't bad for girls."

In the excitement of the game, the chickens, now running riot in the garden at their own sweet will, were forgotten; while the discussion which followed, gave them further opportunity for improving the appearance of the flower-beds.

"What can we do now?" exclaimed Lucy.

"I don't care," cried Mary, who had assumed Freddy's independent walk and loud tones, with a fair amount of success. "I don't care as long as it is a kind of game girls ought not to play at. Let us think of something awful, something that would make Miss Harbutt's hair stand on end."

At that moment Lucy's favourite kitten, a beautiful tabby, with pointed ears and the 'butterfly' mark between the shoulders, raced over the lawn, and in spite of a call

from his mistress, scrambled up the fence and sprang into one of the lower branches of a plane tree which overhung a corner of the garden. For a few seconds he stood looking down on the group of children who were watching his movements, and then he leapt from bough to bough and raced along the branches with such quickness that they held their breath with astonishment.

"Oh! if *we* could only do that," cried Mary enviously. "If we were only cats instead of girls. It must be jolly to be able to climb trees like that. Why, it is almost as good as flying."

"But we are not cats," sighed Lucy. "And we can't play a game like that. Even boys wouldn't be able to do it. Now, Freddy, do try and invent something really 'misbehaving'; something very naughty indeed."

It was no easy matter to think out such an amusement on the spur of the moment, but after rubbing his head vigorously, Freddy hit upon a fresh distraction.

"I don't know what it would do to Miss Harbutt's hair, but suppose we dig a pond and put the gold-fish in it?"

"I don't think there's anything very wicked in doing that," observed Kitty in a tone of disappointment.

"Not for boys to do it, but it is for girls. You'll make yourselves in such a mess," said Freddy consolingly. "Besides, Joskins will get in a frightful rage about it."

This, of course, added considerably to its attractions; and Mary quickly asked where and how such a work was to be accomplished.

"There's a lovely place just this side of those rows of peas. Joskins has put in a lot of spinach seeds, I think; but they haven't come up yet, so it doesn't matter. We can get the spades and things, and dig a hole and then fill it with water."

"But where shall we get the water from?" asked Kitty.

"From the scullery of course; bring it in pails."

"Yes. If Jane doesn't stop us," said Mary, who knew that the housemaid was never in an obliging mood when her fellow-servant was holiday-making. "She is sure to make a fuss about it."

"Oh! we'll manage it somehow," cried

Freddy hopefully. "And now come and help. We'll dig a regular pit."

By this time the fowls had dined handsomely. All the snails and slugs had fled or been gobbled up, and their enemies had commenced scratching holes in eager search for the succulent worms beneath the surface.

Quite oblivious of the havoc which was being wrought in the flower garden, the three girls and their brother, having found sundry garden implements, had commenced their task.

The mere fact that several rows of seeds had been carefully sown on the precise spot of their excavation troubled them not at all, and with fork and spade and trowel, they quickly heaped up the earth, working with such desperate energy that before long hillocks of mould surrounded a hole of large dimensions. Freddy, who was naturally the leader of the party, mainly employed himself in directing the operations. He stood in the centre of the rapidly deepening pond and urged the girls to greater exertions, although occasionally he would throw up a spadeful of earth, much of which

found a resting-place on his sisters' borrowed suits.

"Here!" he exclaimed at last, with an air of triumph; "I think that's big enough for anything. We've dug it out in no time."

"We!" replied Mary, in an irritating tone. "I don't think you have done much, except throw the dirt down our necks," and she wriggled her shoulders with discomfort as she spoke.

"Ah, but I told you how to," explained the boy, with a superior air. "I am the captain and you are the common soldiers."

"We are not common at all," protested Lucy. "Even Miss Harbutt never says that of us."

"Are but I mean private soldiers. Captains don't carry guns; but they wave their swords and tell the company where to shoot. You're my company, and I told you where to shovel."

"Thank you so much," said Mary, with a suspicion of sarcasm. "And now that we have dug the pond, perhaps the captain will tell the private soldiers how to carry

the water; and how Jane is to be persuaded into letting us have it?"

"I'll try at any rate," said Freddy, dubiously. "But she is in an awful temper. You girls will back me up, won't you?"

Having obtained their promise to support him, Freddy marched off kitchenwards followed by his sisters.

Jane had just finished 'cleaning up'. The scullery floor was as white and spotless as scrubbing and hearthstone could make it, while every plate and dish was wiped and put away in the rack. Since the housemaid had not only her own duties to perform, but also those of the cook, she was a little behindhand with her work, and consequently her temper was not to be relied upon.

"I say, Jane," observed the boy carelessly, "where are all the pails?"

"Pails! Master Freddy; what do you want with pails?" asked the girl suspiciously.

"We just want to water the garden—that's all."

"Why, it hasn't long left off raining.

Besides, I won't have you running in and out the clean scullery with your dirty boots, slopping the water all over the place."

"Oh! we shan't make a mess. Where are they?" persisted Freddy.

"I tell you that you can't have them, Master Freddy," said Jane crossly.

"I shall have them if I choose," was the lofty reply.

"We'll see about that. The Mistress said you were not to come in the kitchen at all, or the scullery either. Those are my orders and I'll abide by them."

"But we will be careful, really. Do let us have them," Mary broke in persuasively.

"I'll do nothing—" At that moment the housemaid glanced up and stood rigid with astonishment.

"Good gracious! Miss Mary. What *have* you got on?" she gasped at last, when her surprise permitted her to speak.

In the excitement of pond-making the children had quite forgotten their remarkable costumes, and it was with a little cry of dismay that they noticed Jane's shocked looks.

"It is—it— Oh! we are playing at being boys, Jane: that's all," explained Mary quickly. "So we all put on Freddy's clothes."

"Well, that's a nice game to play at, I'm sure, Miss Mary," the housemaid observed with dignity. "And what your Mamma, or what Miss Harbutt, would say if they saw you, goodness alone knows."

"But they won't see us, so it doesn't matter," remarked Lucy cheerfully. "And as soon as we have finished making the pond, we are going to put on our own dresses again; so do let us have the pails, Jane. We really will be careful."

"No, I will not. There's your answer; and I'll trouble you to go out of my kitchen and leave me to do my work;" and the ruffled Jane brushed past the group and retired into the cellar to refill a coal scuttle,

Now the housemaid's refusal to allow the use of the scullery tap and the pails, meant that their labours of the last half-hour would be thrown away. This was plain even to Freddy's intellect, and it was also evident that Jane was not in a yielding

mood. While the boy stood at a loss what to do, a desperate expedient flashed across Mary's mind.

The thought no sooner came to her than it was acted upon. She made a sudden dash at the door at the top of the cellar stairs, closed it, and turned the key in the lock, thus making the servant a prisoner.

A shout of laughter from Freddy rewarded the feat, while Kitty and Lucy looked on wonderingly.

"That's splendid!" cried the boy. "It will teach her a lesson. We'll keep her down there all the afternoon. But shan't we come in for it afterwards," he added soberly.

"I don't care," answered Mary, who by this time had grown quite reckless of consequences. "We don't often have the chance of an afternoon's fun, and Jane shan't stop us if I can help it."

The housemaid having accomplished her errand, mounted the stairs slowly, while the four children waited in the passage, silent but expectant.

The girl turned the handle, at first quietly

and then with increasing vigour, but it was not until she had wrestled with the lock and heard Freddy's chuckle of satisfaction, that it dawned upon her she was the victim of a conspiracy.

"Master Freddy! Master Freddy! Let me out directly."

There was no answer, and after a moment's pause she again protested.

"Master Freddy, you naughty boy! unlock the door."

Except for a noise which was a little like laughter choked back by handkerchiefs, her demand passed unheeded.

"Unless you open the door directly I shall tell the Mistress the very moment she comes home," cried Jane, her temper rising at the irritating, if smothered, merriment. "I won't have you play your tricks on me. Besides, there's a lot to be done yet," and she shook the door violently as if to emphasise her threat.

Still there came no reply, unless the gurgling sounds from behind the handkerchiefs could be regarded as such.

"Miss Mary, are *you* there? I believe

you are, although you won't answer. Turn the key, if you please." The severe and lofty tone in which the request was made moved Mary to open mirth.

"But I have, Jane," she said at last.

"You have? But the door won't open," said the girl, after another earnest endeavour to escape.

"No. I turned the key the other way," was the grave reply.

"You're a very wicked child. Let me out this moment," exclaimed the victim more than ever enraged at being not only a prisoner, but a laughing-stock.

"No, I don't think we will yet. It's nice and cool down there and the gas is alight, and I'm sure you would like a rest after working so hard," remarked the eldest sister soothingly. "It won't take very long to get the water we want, and then we will let you out. Come along, you three, or Miss Harbutt will be back to interfere."

Heedless of the shower of blows which fell upon the cellar door, and Jane's piteous appeal for liberty, the rebels ferreted out several pails and began their task.

There was no occasion for the prisoner to witness the terrible work which followed. The sound of the water splashing on the scullery floor as the rebels tilted the full pails; the tramp of four pairs of boots thickly plastered, as she guessed, with garden mould, worked upon the feelings of the hapless housemaid, until she scarcely knew how to restrain herself from bursting open the door. Previous experiences had taught her what to expect. Everything in the scullery which had been carefully scrubbed and tidied, was probably turned upside down. Pools of water mixing with the mud were making her afternoon labour worse than useless, while the newly whitened steps outside had, by this time, become a fearful sight to an orderly domestic.

But the heartless children paid no attention to her shrill appeals for liberty, or the succession of peremptory 'bangs' upon the door. They ran in and out, knocking the pails against each other when empty, and staggering under their weight when full, amid shouts of laughter, just as if no such person as Jane existed. Her cup

of misery filled much more quickly than the pond. Although Freddy and his sisters tore to and fro with remarkable energy, emptying bucket after bucket of water into the hole, it disappeared through the earth as soon as it was poured in, and the hope of seeing a miniature lake with gold-fish swimming gracefully from side to side, began to dwindle rapidly away. The climax was brought about by Kitty. She was standing on the brink of this very irritating pond which refused to behave as one, when the earth slipped from beneath her feet, and, with a cry of fear she slid quietly on her back into the centre of the liquid mud. When she scrambled on to dry land, Freddy's flannel suit, in which she was arrayed, presented so grotesque an appearance that the onlookers burst into peals of laughter, and it was not until the corners of the child's mouth began to droop ominously that Mary went to her rescue.

"Never mind, Kitty, you're not hurt; but oh! my dear! what a state you are in. We shall have to scrape you."

"It is all that stupid Freddy," complained

Kitty, with a catch in her voice. "Digging a silly pond that won't hold water. And I am so wet and messy. Oh! it is nasty! Boys always play horrid games like this."

"That's right. Pitch into me," cried Freddy, hurt by this ungrateful remark. "I've been finding fun for you all the afternoon, and this is what I get for it."

"But you might have guessed that the water wouldn't stay where we put it," chimed in Mary, who was busily engaged in wiping some of the mud from her sister, with a pocket-handkerchief; "only you haven't any sense."

"Oh! Look here. If it comes to that, you're older than I am, Mary, so you haven't any sense either," growled the boy.

"Yes. It's as much your fault as his, Mary," said Lucy crossly, who was not going to see her twin-brother falsely accused. "You're the eldest. It is downright mean to say that."

Since the mischief was done, quarrelling was quite useless, so that Mary wisely held her tongue, and, assisted by Lucy, continued to smear the dirt more evenly over Kitty's

costume. The three were so occupied in this performance that they failed to notice Freddy peer through the laurel hedge, and then quietly steal away from the scene of this latest exploit; neither did they hear light footsteps coming steadily from the direction of the side gate. They looked up quickly enough, however, when they heard the well-known voice of Miss Harbutt in accents of the greatest astonishment.

“It—it—it— Good gracious!”

Now Miss Harbutt, in spite of the slighting remarks of Mary and her sisters had been pleased to make upon her, was a pleasant-faced lady of forty, agreeable enough, if somewhat cold, when the girls were well-behaved and obedient, which sometimes happened; but stern and resolute during their frequent spells of naughtiness. At present, she looked very grave and surprised, while the dreadful silence that followed her first remark made the culprits not a little uncomfortable.

“What *does* this mean?”

There was no answer.

“Mary, will you kindly explain?”

"Well, you see, Miss Harbutt, we—we—thought we should like to make a pond, so we dug a hole and poured water into it, and it wouldn't stop, so Kitty fell in and—and—we're wiping the mud off, and th—th—that's all," said Mary, all in one breath.

"Indeed. But how is it that you are in these extraordinary costumes? I can't understand it," continued the governess more severely. "I feel quite ashamed to look at you."

"We put them on—for fun," came the answer.

"For fun! A very pleasant, ladylike idea of amusement to be sure."

"There is no harm in it. Boys' clothes are very comfortable. We should always like to wear them," cried Mary recklessly.

"I am very surprised and grieved to hear you say so. Go to your room and change directly. I am extremely angry with you."

There was no gainsaying a request so sharply given, and the three culprits, with mutinous faces, walked with much dignity into the house, Miss Harbutt bringing up the rear.

No sooner were they indoors than a mysterious series of thumps from the region of the kitchen, brought the governess to a sudden standstill.

“What is that noise?” she asked abruptly.

“I expect it’s Jane doing something,” explained Mary eagerly. “Shall I go and see?”

“Thank you. I will go myself,” and while the girls slowly ascended the staircase, Miss Harbutt proceeded to investigate.

No sooner had the lady reached the cellar door than the reason of Jane’s vigorous onslaught became manifest, and without delay the unfortunate prisoner was released. The girl emerged quite scarlet with anger and exertion, and in answer to Miss Harbutt’s astonished gaze poured forth her wrongs.

“Those children locked me in, Miss. I don’t know which, but it’s one of ’em. They wanted to slop the water all over the scullery and I wouldn’t let ’em; so this is the way they served me. I’ve been there for hours, Miss,—all among the coals and spiders and beetles. Oh! it’s shameful!

And just look here, Miss. There's a nice state for a scullery to be in—just after I've cleared up," she continued, glaring round her domain. "Look at it. What isn't water is mud. Would any girl put up with it? I'll give notice—that's what I'll do. It's enough to drive anyone out of their wits to live with such naughty children. I left it as clean as a new pin, and now it's—it's—road scrapings and burst pipes."

In truth the scene was enough to strike terror into the heart of the bravest housemaid. Boots caked with mud had left their marks in every direction. Pail after pail had spilt part of its contents on the hearth-stoned floor, so that earth and water had spread in dark muddy streams over its once white surface. "Oh! it's too bad—too bad!" and after another glance at the havoc wrought by the late occupiers, Jane burst into tears.

"They shall be well punished; you may be sure of that." Miss Harbutt spoke as though she meant it.

"Punished! I'm sure I hope so. But that won't help to clean my scullery, Miss," sobbed the girl. "I've tried and tried to

keep things tidy and nice ; but it's no good, I'll go at the end of my month as sure as my name is Jane. Those children are more than any girl can stand." With which threat the girl retired to nurse her grief in the kitchen, while Miss Harbutt followed the small sinners upstairs, intent upon meting out a richly deserved punishment.

CHAPTER II.

THE TORTURE OF THE DOLLS—AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

It having been made plain why Mary rattled in vain at the door-handle, and why Miss Harbutt turned the key from the other side, the further exploits of these model young ladies will be related in the order in which they occurred.

The eldest girl retired from the door and sat herself, with a shrug of the shoulders, on the table by Lucy's side.

"After all," she said, having further contemplated the extent of their wickedness, "I don't see that we've been very naughty. Not nearly so naughty as we could have been if we had tried harder. If boys wear knickerbockers and things, why shouldn't girls? I'm sure there are heaps of ladies on bicycles who do. I wonder if they get locked in the nursery when they go home?"

"I daresay they would—if Miss Harbutt

had anything to do with it," snapped Lucy. "She would say, 'Oh, how unladylike! You must be severely punished. I shall tell your Mamma.'" And the child's imitation of Miss Harbutt's manner was close enough to send the other two into fits of laughter.

"And even if we did let the chickens out, the poor things enjoyed it. Besides, they scratched up all the slugs and snails—at least I suppose they did," Mary observed.

"I daresay. Anyhow they scratched up everything else," cried Lucy. "So I expect Joskins won't be very grateful after all."

"No. That is just it," observed Kitty woefully. "Whenever we try to do anything useful, it always turns out wrong somehow. I don't see the use of trying to be good. You get just as much punished for it as if you were naughty. Do you recollect filling father's ink-stands one day?"

"When we upset the ink on some books?" cried the eldest girl, with a flash of recollection.

"Yes. Well, we didn't mean to. But if we had done it on purpose, we couldn't have been worse treated."

"It is always the way," sighed Lucy.

"If we were only boys, it would be all right," explained Mary indignantly. "Boys don't get punished. They get all the fun, and girls get all the plain teas and shuttings up. It's a great shame!"

At that moment there was the rattle of tea-cups outside the door, followed by the turning of the key. The children looked round and saw Jane of the angry countenance enter the room, carrying a tray, which she "plumped" down upon the table, with quite unnecessary violence. Then, without a word, she retired, banging the door and turning the key behind her.

"Bad-tempered thing," sniffed Lucy. "Just because we locked her in the cellar and made the scullery a little dirty."

"Some people get out of temper for nothing at all. But never mind. Let us have tea, or whatever it is." And Mary threw herself into a chair at the table, an example followed by the rest.

"I suppose it is a very plain tea," sighed Lucy.

"I should think it was;" and Mary criti-

cally examined the substantial slices of bread which Jane had provided. "Can anybody see the butter?"

"I'm not sure;" and Kitty turned her slice over contemptuously.

"I think my piece is a little greasy in the middle."

"And I wonder what Jane calls this?" added Mary in great scorn. "Milk and water?"

Lucy tasted it, and made a wry face before replying:

"Doesn't something dreadful happen to people who mix water with milk? Aren't they put in prison?"

"Are they?" chimed in Kitty. "Then the next time we're out with Jane, let us give her in charge of a policeman."

"Whenever she is out, she generally is in charge of a policeman, and so it won't make much difference," explained Mary, who had not gone through life with her eyes shut.

At this moment they were startled by a sudden cry from Lucy, who had sprung from her chair and was eagerly fumbling in her pocket.

"Oh for goodness! I have forgotten something. You know when Miss Harbutt went into the kitchen?"

The other girls nodded.

"Well, I guessed we should be locked in with a plain tea, and so I rushed to the store cupboard and stole something."

"What?" cried Mary and Kitty simultaneously.

"Jam!"

"Jam! Where is it?"

"In my pocket, wrapped up in paper. I hope it hasn't come through. No—not much. There it is," and the girl placed a sodden, unappetising newspaper parcel on the table, with an air of triumph.

"You're a very good child indeed," said Mary, hugging her with a burst of enthusiasm.

"But it looks rather messy, doesn't it?" enquired Kitty, who had been gazing doubtfully upon the unwholesome package in which print and jam struggled for the mastery.

"There is gratitude!" was Lucy's indignant rejoinder. "Anyhow it's better than nothing."

"So it is—ever so much," said her conscience-stricken sister. "But how are we going to spread it? We haven't any knives, or spoons either."

For a moment or two the trio remained non-plussed, until a happy idea occurred to Mary.

"I know. Pencils will do. We are not wearing our company manners."

Slate pencils were poor substitutes for knives or spoons; but the girls persevered bravely, and before long each slice of bread was bountifully smeared with jam.

"I wish it didn't taste so 'slaty,'" complained Kitty.

"Oh! you are too particular," snapped Lucy, who, having provided the luxury, regarded such an observation as base ingratitude. "You needn't eat any, you know, if you would rather not."

"No. There is plenty of bread," added Mary severely. "Perhaps you would prefer that."

Crushed by these severe remarks, Kitty munched away in silence, while Mary looked round with a discontented air.

"There is something wrong about us," she said after a pause.

"Wrong! What sort of wrong? Do you mean naughty?" asked Lucy.

"No. Not naughty. We are too proper. We sit just as Miss Harbutt tells us to sit. Let us put our elbows on the table. She says it is very rude. So we'll do it."

This admirable suggestion was carried out promptly, and three pairs of elbows sprawled over the table.

"And then," continued Mary with a wicked gleam in her eye, "Miss Harbutt says that to speak when our mouths are full is shocking."

"Oh! *So* shocking!" observed Lucy, again mimicking that good lady. "Then we will chatter like anything." And amid uproarious merriment their tongues wagged vigorously, for all the world as though a dozen farm-yard fowls had been let loose in the nursery.

At last, however, the jam disposed of, they all jumped up from the table, and with great noise and clatter heaped the cups and saucers on the tray, which was finally deposited in a remote corner of the room.

“What shall we do now?” asked Kitty, who had been making vain attempts to slide on the carpet. “Is there anything to read?”

“Only a book of Fairy Stories,” replied Lucy. “And I don’t care for fairy stories. Nobody believes there are such things as fairies.

“Of course not. Besides, we know the tales by heart,” yawned Mary. “What else is there. Any skipping ropes?”

“They are down stairs.”

“Any tops?”

“No. Besides, you can’t spin tops.”

“Indeed I can,” observed Mary indignant-ly. “Freddy taught me. But as usual Miss Harbutt said it was ‘so unladylike’ and took mine away. When I grow up,” she added with great emphasis, “if there is one thing I shall try *not* to be, it is a lady.”

“So shall I,” cried Kitty with much sympathy. “Why, ladies mustn’t even whistle. Let us try whistling. P’r’aps Miss Harbutt will hear us,” she added vindictively.

“Oh yes! Let’s. And— Oh for goodness! I’ve forgotten something,” and Lucy, who



*They were borne away . . . upwards
and onwards.*

had just pursed up her lips, once more dived her hand into her pocket.

“Jam?” exclaimed Mary.

“Or sweets?” cried Kitty, with glowing eyes.

“No, greedy things,” replied Lucy reprovingly. “Better than that—a book. I found it under Freddy’s pillow this morning. It is one of those with a picture in the front. He calls it a ‘penny horrible’. Oh! it’s so exciting!” and flourishing the book in the air, the girl sat on the table, while the other two took up a position each side of her.

“What is the name of it?” asked Kitty, with a wondering look at the highly coloured picture with ornamented the cover.

“‘Daring Dick’—‘Daring Dick.’ Isn’t that beautiful? ‘Daring Dick, or the Scorpion of the Sierras.’”

“But what is it all about?” queried the elder girl.

“Indians! Red Indians! Fightings! Torturings! Shootings! Oh! It’s lovely!” cried Lucy, with enthusiasm.

“And do they really kill one another?” whispered the awe-struck Kitty.

"Oh yes! By dozens. And when they are tortured first, it's better than anything. It's so creepy."

"I suppose that picture is where the torture is going on?" observed the elder girl.

"Yes. You see this is how it all was," commenced Lucy. "Daring Dick was chums—Freddy says 'chums'—with one tribe. And when he was away killing lions or elephants or some other American wild beast," she explained with a fine disregard for accuracy, "another tribe came along in the dark and killed a lot of his tribe and took the others into custody—"

"You mean captivity," corrected Mary.

"Don't interrupt. It's the same thing. Well, when he came back," she continued, gasping, "and found what they had done, he was quite annoyed about it, and 'vowed vengeance.' They're always 'vowing vengeance' in this book. So he got some other white people and red people together and 'followed the trail'—they are always 'following the trail' in this book—and caught the other tribe just as they were beginning to torture the prisoners."

"Oh! How did they torture them?" begged Kitty "Please tell us."

"Yes, do," echoed Mary. "That is the part I like."

"They throw tomahawks at them and shoot bows and arrows into their arms and legs, and when they get tired of that, they—they—burn them," explained Lucy, dropping her voice to an awed whisper.

"And—and what then?" said Kitty eagerly.

"I suppose that is all. I don't see what else they can do."

There was a moment's pause after this gruesome recital, and then Mary sprang down from the table, bursting with a great idea.

"Wouldn't it make a lovely game?"

"Oh! Splendid! Let us play it." And the younger girls bounced about the room eager to commence.

"Very well," continued Mary. "I'll belong to the torturing tribe."

"And so will I," cried Lucy.

"And so will I," echoed Kitty.

"But look here," observed the eldest girl, with a puzzled expression. "If we all

belong to the torturers, there is nobody left to torture."

"Ah, dear! I never thought of that," and Kitty paused in the midst of a wild war-dance.

"If we could only capture Miss Harbutt," said Lucy viciously. "Shouldn't I like to dance round and throw things at her?"

"It would be nice. But it can't be done. I wonder if Freddy would be a captive?" was Mary's next suggestion.

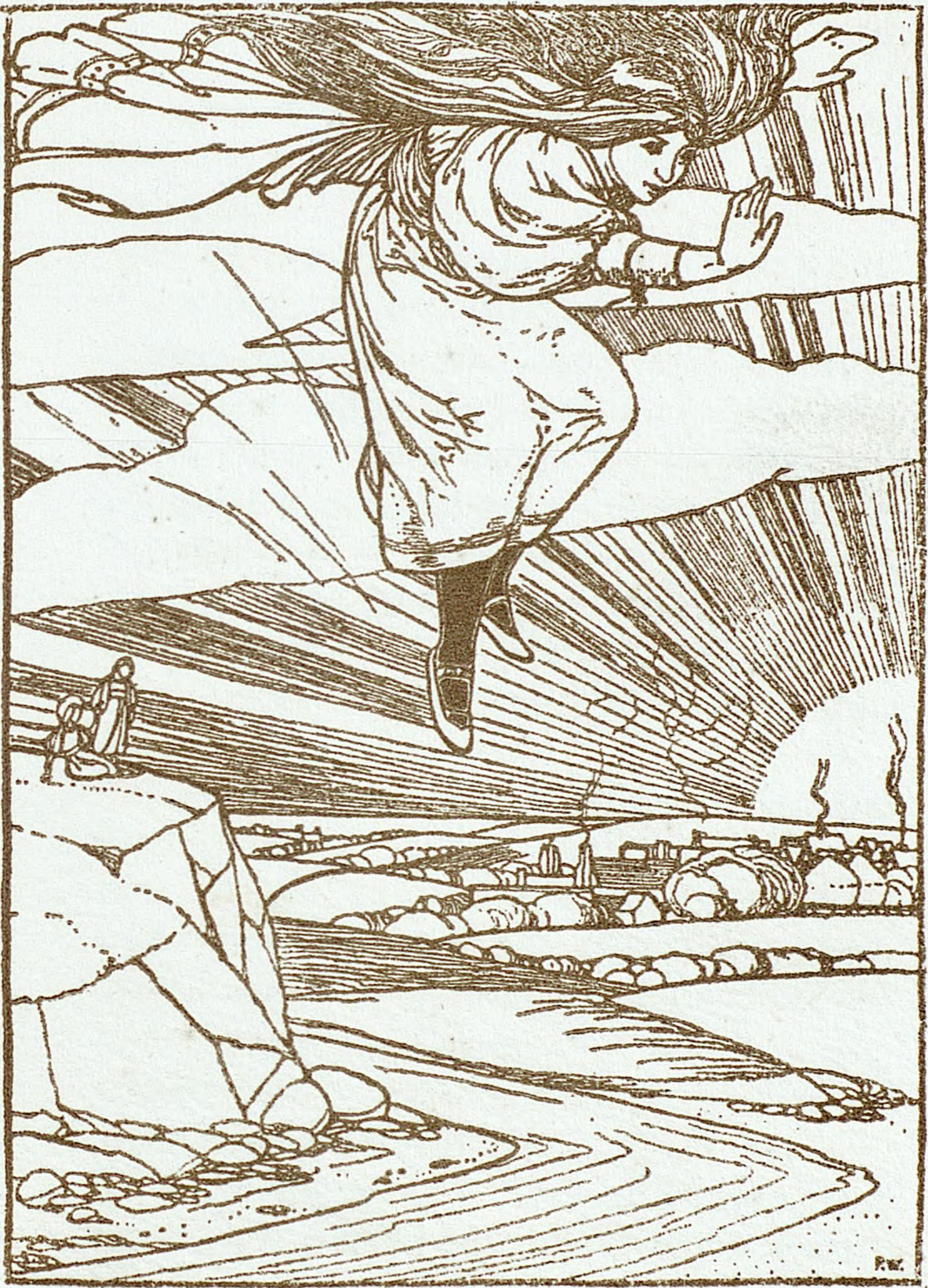
"I am sure he wouldn't. Boys are dreadful cowards," at once answered Lucy.

"Then you be one, Lucy dear," said Mary coaxingly. "I'm sure you would enjoy it."

"Please, Lucy," chimed in Kitty. "We wouldn't burn you, anyhow."

"No. It hurts frightfully. Besides, when you are tortured, you have to keep quiet, to shew you don't mind it; but I'm sure I should shriek. You try, Mary; you are the eldest."

Each in turn, with the most sisterly hugs and endearments, attempted to secure a victim; but without avail.



*She went soaring up high above the heads
of her sisters.*

They were just giving up the idea in despair, when a happy thought occurred to Lucy.

“Oh for goodness! I’ve thought of something. Why not torture the dolls?”

Here was the very thing; and a sudden rush was made for the large play-box, which stood in a corner by the fireplace, to find the unhappy captives of the attacking party. In a few moments the floor was strewn with toys, some broken, others almost new, and it was not until the box was nearly empty that Mary found the objects of their search.

“Here’s Juliana! Catch, Lucy.” And a doll flew up to the ceiling, and then fell head first on the carpet. The same fate overtook Ophelia, who was Kitty’s property, and when Mary sprang up holding a third doll, known as Belinda, by the leg, and swung her round violently, the number of victims was complete.

At one time, these three playthings were the most treasured belongings of the sisters. But their beautiful wax faces by constant kissing, lost the pink and white bloom of

health, and became a bilious yellow from too many caresses. The constant dressing and undressing to which they were subjected wore out their clothes; so that their waning charms, and the increasing age of their small mistresses, who professed to be too old for dolls, found them ragged and dirty and battered; creatures not of worship but of contempt.

"You haven't grown any prettier, Belinda," cried Mary, after a critical examination. "I haven't seen you for a year, and you are uglier than ever."

"And so is Ophelia," said Lucy.

"And so is Juliana," added Kitty. "They deserve to be tortured for being hideous. Now let us begin. You know all about it, Lucy."

"Well," explained Lucy, with some deliberation. "They ought to be tied to stakes, with bundles of wood all round them—to set fire to, you know. But we haven't any stakes or anything. Besides, we should burn the house down."

"That is a nuisance. Never mind. We'll leave the burning out," suggested Mary,

“and only do the tomahawking part of it. What are tomahawks, Lucy?”

“Sort of knives, I think. And there are no knives up here.”

“Or bows and arrows either,” chimed in Kitty ruefully,

“It is stupid. We have nothing to torture them with.”

But Lucy’s quick wit once more came to the rescue.

“I know! I’ve thought of something,” she cried, clapping her hands. “Don’t you recollect Freddy making some darts out of father’s penholders—and father being so angry about it.”

“Oh yes!” exclaimed Mary eagerly. “Because they were his best nibs, and Freddy stuck them all over the drawingroom ceiling.”

“Well, I believe some of them are up here somewhere. We will search.”

With this new-born hope to cheer them, the girls commenced an eager hunt for the weapons. At last a cry of triumph from Kitty proclaimed that her quest was successful, and with a flourish, she produced three darts from a drawer in the table.

"Here they are. Splendid! the very things!" she cried.

"Oh! won't they stick in beautifully? They are heaps better than tomahawks. Now where shall we put the prisoners?"

"Sit them on the mantelpiece," suggested Lucy.

The girls were just going to adopt this method when Mary stopped them.

"Wait a minute. Oughtn't they to be black?"

"Not black—red. I suppose Red Indians are red; aren't they?" observed Kitty doubtfully.

"Anyhow, they shouldn't be white. Let us paint them. There is a paint-box at the bottom of the play-box. I saw it."

This idea seemed too good to be wasted, and so the play-box was once more rummaged, and a box of paints produced, containing everything necessary for the occasion.

Lucy having discovered some liquid in the bottom of a cup, poured it into the saucer, scornfully remarking that "the milk wouldn't make any difference," and then

the trio sat at the table, each with her doll in her lap, and prepared to ornament the battered lineaments of her once cherished favourite.

"They ought not to be all one colour," remarked Lucy, dabbing her brush in the milk and water, and then rubbing it on a square of vermilion paint. "You see when Red Indians fight, they put their war paint on all stripy, you know, to make themselves ugly."

"Poor Belinda is ugly enough already," laughed Mary.

"And Ophelia's nose is smashed flat," said Kitty, with a giggle.

"And Juliana has lost one eye and a bit of an arm," cried Lucy. "We'll suppose that they have been tortured before."

"Not much supposing, if they could really feel," observed Mary, working busily, with her head on one side. "I jumped on Belinda once."

"Oh! I never did that to Ophelia," remarked Kitty, a trifle shocked. "But I used to bend her legs the wrong way to make her sit up properly."

“And once I left Juliana inside the fender, and her face all melted. She looked so funny afterwards,” and Lucy shook with merriment at the recollection.

“There, isn’t that beautiful?” said Mary, holding up Belinda with an air of pride.

“Rather smudgy. But somehow the paint won’t stop where you put it,” replied Kitty, gazing ruefully at the blurred line of red and black on Ophelia’s face.

“Never mind. They ought to be hideous,” exclaimed Lucy, springing from her chair. “Oh! I should like to paint Miss Harbutt. How funny she would look with dabs all over her. Now put the others up here,” she continued, placing Juliana on the mantelpiece with her back to the wall, “and we’ll commence the torture.”

“We must stand here,” commanded Mary, taking three long strides to a dark stain on the carpet, caused by the fall of an ink-pot—“and fancy they are all Miss Harbuts; we shall throw all the straighter. Lucy, you have first ‘shy’—as Freddy calls it,” she added, seeing the shocked looks of her sisters. “And Kitty and I will

beat the tom-toms, or whatever they are called."

"But what are tom-toms?" asked Kitty.

"I don't know. Drums, I think. Bang the cups and saucers together, that will do. And dance about and 'stomp,' to make Miss Harbutt think we are enjoying ourselves," she added, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

Then commenced a perfect storm of noise. Each girl, in a great state of excitement, took her place on the ink-stain and aimed the darts, with more or less precision, at the unfortunate dolls who sat limp and woe-begone on the mantelpiece. The other pair employed their time in uttering shrill cries, dancing round the table, and banging the tea-things together, only stopping to applaud wildly when one or the other of the dolls received a dart full on her waxen face or saw-dust body.

At last, exhausted by their exertions, they all paused in their sport and examined the victims to find what damage had been inflicted.

"We haven't quite killed them; have we?" laughed Kitty.

"No. But they look very uncomfortable," said Mary. "And they would look more uncomfortable if they could feel. What did you say happens to the prisoners when the torturing part is over?"

"Well, they're supposed to be tied to posts, with faggots round them, and they're burnt," remarked Lucy.

"Oh! How horrid!" ejaculated Mary, with a little shudder.

"But of course we can't do that; because there is no wood, or matches either."

"What a pity Freddy isn't here," continued Mary regretfully. "His pockets are always full of matches."

"Matches, why?" said the innocent Kitty.

"Because—" observed Lucy mysteriously, "Only don't tell anyone—because he smokes!"

"No!" ejaculated the others.

"He does, though. And gets dreadfully ill after it."

"Then why does he do it?" said Mary puzzled.

"Because he ought not to. Boys are very like girls in some things," answered the



Leaving the Girls to their Novel Repast.

observant Lucy. "Anyhow, we can't burn the dolls, and so there is an end of this game."

By way of answer, Mary seized Belinda roughly by the leg and swung her round vigorously.

"There, Belinda, I don't want you any longer. You were not very beautiful, white; but now you are a perfect fright and I can't bear you." So saying, she hurled the doll to the ceiling, and it fell with a dull thud behind a screen which stood in the corner of the room.

"Ophelia—you blackamoor! go after Belinda," cried Kitty, following her elder sister's example.

"And as for you, Juliana! I would rather nurse Miss Harbutt," and Lucy flung the doll after its misused companions. "And now what shall we do?" continued the child, with a yawn, throwing herself into a chair. "I am sleepy somehow. But it isn't bedtime yet."

"Not for hours," replied Mary. "Torturing people is very hard work—isn't it? I don't know what we can do with ourselves. Some-

body says that there is always evil work for idle hands to do. But I can't find any. Wish I could. I *am* sleepy. Read some of that Indian story, Lucy, to keep me awake."

"I am much too tired. Besides, there are so many long words in it that I can't pronounce. It's a very funny thing; but I never felt so sleepy before in all my life;" and she stretched herself wearily, and then let her head drop on her arms, which rested upon the table.

"So am I," mumbled Kitty, who had curled herself up on the floor and was leaning against Mary's knee. "I can scarcely keep my eyes open. I thought people with guilty consciences never went to sleep?"

"I suppose our consciences have got used to being guilty," replied Mary, between two yawns. "Anyhow, I shall never keep awake."

"I can't either," sighed Lucy.

"Nor I," murmured Kitty.

And in a few moments the trio seemed sleeping soundly. How long they remained unconscious, they had no means of knowing; but Mary awoke suddenly, with an

uneasy feeling that something was about to happen.

The room was almost dark, and the girl could only faintly perceive Lucy's figure outlined against the wall behind her. Kitty was stirring uneasily, and moaning a little as though in a troubled dream.

Then came absolute silence, broken at last by faint sounds of music; music so strange and sweet and sad that Mary had never before heard anything like it. The strains brought a lump to her throat.

It was certainly no one playing on the piano in the drawing-room, while it still less resembled the music of a German band. She sat quite motionless, drinking in the unearthly melody, until a soft glow stole into the room, and melted the prevailing darkness. The girl looked round to see whence came the light, but without success; and while lost in wonderment, a slight rustling behind the screen made her rivet her gaze in this direction. Then a most wonderful thing happened.

From behind the folds there appeared three figures cloaked from head to foot

in some filmy, gauze-like material. They advanced to the centre of the room, slowly waving silver wands which shimmered as they moved. Then the long veils fell away from the strange visitors, and to Mary's horror, she recognized the three dolls, now grown to the same size as the girls themselves.

As though with one accord, the girls sprang to their feet, too horror-stricken, at first, to utter a word.

"Who are you? Oh! Please, who are you?" said Mary, at length, in a frightened whisper.

"I am Belinda," came back the answer in a very low reproachful voice.

"Then—then—you are Ophelia!" panted Kitty, clutching Mary's arm in abject terror. "And—and you are alive!"

"Ophelia! Alive!" said the doll, turning her poor battered, painted face to the child, who cowered down appalled at the sight.

"It's—it's Juliana! Oh for goodness!" wailed Lucy, rushing across the floor and clinging to Mary.

"I am Juliana," echoed the third figure.

The girls shrank away as the dolls advanced towards them, until, having made vain attempts to get through the walls behind them, they were brought to bay.

"What do you want? We—we—haven't done anything." Mary cried in gasps.

"Come! Come!" came the reply, in the same low sad tone.

"But we—we don't want to. We are a—a—afraid!"

"Follow! follow! I bid you follow," said the reproachful voice.

"W—w—where will you take us to?"

"Where cruel acts shall meet with their reward. Follow! Follow!"

As the doll spoke, she and her companions came quite close, so that each dent on their faces, each mark that ill-usage and neglect had caused, could be plainly seen, through the dirty, soiled dresses, which somehow had become transparent.

Then the wands circled once more and fell lightly on the shoulders of the children.

In a moment, the walls and room disappeared. There came a sweep of keen

air which left them breathless; and they were borne away by some resistless power, upwards and onwards, until there came a whirl and tumult in their brains, a rush and roar of sound, and then they knew no more.

CHAPTER III.

A REALLY SURPRISING TRANSFORMATION.

WHEN the girls regained their senses it was broad daylight, and they were lying beneath the shade of a very large bracken at the base of an enormous oak tree.

Mary was the first one to awake. She sat up, rubbed her eyes and looked round bewildered, trying to piece together her thoughts. It seemed only a few minutes before that they were all in the schoolroom, playing at Indians; but now they were in a forest.

Was she dreaming? She shut her eyes tight and pinched herself, expecting to re-open them upon familiar surroundings. But no. Pinching had no effect. There were the fronds of wild fern curling gracefully over her head, and there was the mighty tree-trunk, which seemed hundreds and hundreds feet in height, reaching nearly to the sky.

Then she noticed that her sleeping sisters

were attired in dresses quite different to anything she had ever before seen. These fell in soft and clinging folds, leaving both necks and arms bare; while the material of which they were made looked finer than the finest silk and lighter than the most delicate lace. Never in her life had she seen anything so beautiful, and she sat up lost in admiration.

At last both her companions stirred, opened their eyes, and seemed quite as astonished as Mary.

“What has happened?” cried Lucy.

“Where are we?” said Kitty.

“I don’t know. Perhaps we are asleep. Would one of you mind pinching me to make sure?”

Lucy proceeded to obey her request with such good will that Mary cried out with the pain.

“We can’t be asleep—can we?” she said, with a puzzled air. “Indeed I never felt wider awake. But what does it all mean? How did you two get those beautiful dresses?”

“And how did you get yours?” cried

Lucy. "Why, it's prettier than the prettiest party dress I ever saw."

"I don't know. We had better think hard about it. It's too mysterious for anything."

Each girl sat with elbows on knees, clutching her head tightly, a position considered to be the most suitable for cogitation, until Lucy uttered a little scream, and sat bolt upright.

"Oh for goodness! I know. We are in Fairyland!"

"In Fairyland!" exclaimed the others. "What rubbish!"

"It isn't rubbish at all. Don't you remember what happened in the schoolroom? How Belinda and Juliana and Ophelia grew big and spoke," she continued in a very cautious whisper.

"Of course. How silly of us!" answered Mary, glancing round fearfully. "But they couldn't be Fairies."

"Well, they weren't real dolls anyhow, for they walked and talked."

"They did, didn't they?" exclaimed Kitty. "And weren't we in a 'wiggle,' when they came from behind the screen and carried

us off," she added, the memory of the strange journey coming back to her. "Only I don't know much about it after we started, because something kept whirling round in my head like a mad watch."

"So it did in mine," remarked Mary.

"And in mine too," echoed Lucy. "And that is all I recollect."

There was another pause, and the three looked at each other doubtfully.

"And what is going to happen now?" said the youngest girl.

"I don't know and I don't care," cried Mary, with a light laugh, jumping to her feet. "I'm going to—"

The girl's observation was cut short by a most surprising circumstance. She had shaken out her skirts and leapt over a trailing branch of wild rose which lay almost on the ground, when she went soaring up high above the heads of her sisters, and came down as lightly as a butterfly.

"Oh for goodness!" cried Lucy.

"Oh! O-oh!" ejaculated Kitty, almost breathless.

"If that isn't the most wonderful— Try if

you two can do it?" said Mary, when her astonishment would let her speak.

The two younger girls hastened to try their jumping powers, and found that they also were able to perform the same astounding feat.

"I don't believe that anybody in this world can jump half as high as we can. As for Freddy, why, we could beat him anyhow," added Mary triumphantly.

"'In this world.' What world?" asked Lucy. "It seems to me that everything is different somehow. It is all ten times as large. I don't understand it at all."

Indeed, when they looked round, the truth of Lucy's observation was apparent. Not only were trees and bracken gigantic, but the grasses, although of the same kind they were familiar with, grew taller than themselves; while the blue-bells and bachelor-buttons and wild roses which met them on every side, were too large to carry, even had they possessed the strength to snap the stems.

"Perhaps we are on the Equator," suggested Lucy, who had a dim idea that all vegetation was immense in the tropics.

“But roses and blue-bells and things don’t grow there,” said Mary, speaking from a larger wisdom. “It’s just like the woods near home, under a magnifying glass. Why not explore? We might find somebody to ask all about it.”

Urged on by the prospect of discovering further wonders, the three adventurers started forth on their travels. Although the long grass waving over their heads gave them little chance of seeing far ahead, they had no difficulty in progressing, since paths were clearly marked as though others had often trodden the way which lay before them. Now and again a broken twig or a chasm in the dry earth barred their progress, but these obstacles were easily surmounted, and they rushed forward rapidly.

Before long the children emerged from the grass forest and came to a level stretch of sward, almost as smooth and close as the lawn at home, except that each blade of grass was absurdly thick and coarse. Thanks, however, to their strange lightness the children passed over it gaily enough, and descended a hill, thinking to find some in-

habitants of this strange world in the valley below.

As they ran down the slope they noticed a low murmur which grew louder and louder every minute, until, as they approached a line of the very largest rushes they had ever seen, it became a roar of sound.

"I wonder what it is?" observed Kitty, trying to peer through the mass of leaves which waved and rustled in the breeze. "Sounds like a river or waterfall, or something."

"P'r'aps it's Niagara. It makes noise enough anyhow," shouted Lucy through the din.

"We'll soon find out," answered Mary at the top of her voice. "I've seen pictures of Niagara, and the panorama as well. I'm sure to know it again."

Although the ground had become very soft and marshy, the girls tripped along without sinking in; and, picking their way through the great clumps of yellow and blue flags which shot forth their heads of gorgeous flower, and between bulrushes with stems like masts, they came to the edge of a most turbulent river.

It was as clear as crystal, and strewn with huge rocks shaped like stones, around which the water boiled and foamed, making countless eddies in which leaves of remarkable dimensions and logs of wood were whirling round in a most bewildering fashion.

As they stood looking down on the resistless flood, there came a tremendous splash which made them all jump. Close at hand was a monstrous brown animal swimming across to the other side.

"It *is* the Equator!" cried Kitty triumphantly. "There goes a hippopotamus."

"It isn't a hippopotamus at all," protested Mary. "Whoever saw hippopotamuses with whiskers and noses and long tails like that? It is a rat."

"A rat!" exclaimed Lucy. "There never was a rat that size."

"If you multiply an ordinary rat by a hundred, you'll get the answer," said Mary. "Pinch me again, Lucy, to make sure I'm awake."

Lucy pinched so hard and Mary yelled so lustily that there seemed no doubt on this point.

"Look out!" cried Kitty in terror, just as Mary had finished rubbing her arm. "Here comes an eagle."

As she spoke, there swept over the water, with the quickness of light, a glorious creature with a long tapering body, and splendid wings, many coloured, flashing in the sunbeams.

To and fro he sped, now darting up the river, now poised almost motionless, with his four gauzy wings spread and his graceful body quivering, close to the surface of the water.

"It isn't an eagle at all. It's a dragon-fly," cried Lucy, after a careful examination.

"But it's as big as an—"

"Of course it is," interrupted her elder sister. "Everything is big. It's the most confusing place I was ever in. I don't understand it at all."

There was every excuse for Mary's puzzled brain. Each object they saw was familiar and yet astonishingly large. The fish in the water, which, at first, they regarded as salmon, proved, after all, to be sticklebacks or minnows. The river was merely a brook ;

while the rocks around which the quickly flowing stream foamed and bubbled, were only stones.

Nothing was its proper size; not even the butterflies which fluttered overhead like beautiful painted kites, blue or creamy white, or rich purple and red.

"I don't believe that anything is really bigger," observed Mary at last, after a few minutes deep thought. "The truth is that we are just tiny mites ourselves. Little bits of things not a quarter our usual size."

"But how did we get so small?" asked Lucy, puzzled.

"I don't know, unless the dolls did it. It's no good guessing though," she added laughing. "We have grown the wrong way."

"But I don't feel any different," remarked Kitty. "And you two look just the same."

"Of course we do; that doesn't prove anything. I'm not going to worry about it. Here we are some size or another; and I mean to get across to the other side," Mary went on, eager to make further exploration. "We can step over on the stones."

“Suppose we slip,” said the more cautious Lucy. “We shall be drowned.”

“Oh! Nonsense! We shall float if we do fall in, because we are so light. Come along. I’ll go first to shew you how easy it is.”

The girl’s confident air quickly reassured the others, and the three pushed their way through the rushes until they came to a spot where the crossing looked quite safe and easy.

Mary was just stepping on to the first stone when she was stopped in a most remarkable manner.

From behind a tuft of reeds a grasshopper suddenly appeared, and with a jump came directly in front of her. He stood on his long hind-legs and made a very low bow.

In all their lives the girls had never seen so large or so polite a grasshopper, and as it seemed only proper to encourage good manners among insects, they curtsied in return.

The greeting over, Mary waited for him to hop out of the way, but he maintained his ground.

"I beg your pardon. But would you mind standing on one side," she said jokingly, never dreaming that he would understand her speech. But to her great astonishment he replied at once:

"No further. The Queen forbids it."

The three girls stood staring at him, quite speechless. They had seen working ants, and heard talking parrots, but that a grasshopper could express himself in quite correct English was an overpowering discovery.

"But—but we want to go over to the other side," she explained when surprise permitted her to speak again.

"No further. The Queen forbids it," he said with another bow.

"The Queen? I don't understand. Are you a policeman?" she asked, vaguely aware that constables regulated traffic. "Because I don't suppose the Queen would mind us walking about over there—unless it's trespassing."

"No further. The Queen forbids it."

Now although the grasshopper was very much higher than any they had previously

been acquainted with, Mary could easily have pushed him out of the way. His determined demeanour, however, and dignified aspect made this quite out of the question, so after several appeals, which only elicited the same reply, the girls gave it up in despair and left the obstinate insect master of the situation.

For some hours they wandered about, apparently free to roam where they pleased. But at certain points other grasshoppers, equally polite, but quite as unyielding, barred their progress, and it gradually dawned upon them that they were prisoners, although their prison was in the open air and amid the most delightful scenery.

This circumstance naturally damped their spirits. Besides this, their wanderings had made them tired and hungry, and since there seemed no prospect of finding beds and supper, they began to feel very miserable and homesick.

"If we could only find the place where we started from," sighed Kitty, "it would be all right. Anyhow, it was nice and comfortable."

"But you can't be nice and comfortable when you are hungry," grumbled Lucy. "And what should we find to eat when we got there?"

"What can we eat anywhere?" Mary remarked, after thinking deeply. "Fancy eating meat!" And all three shuddered at the word. "Why, a chop is nearly as big as we are; and a joint—Gracious!—a joint would be as big as a house now. Besides, the thought of meat makes me feel ill."

"And a slice of bread and butter," cried Lucy, "why, we could dance on it." And they all laughed at the mere idea.

"At any rate we are dreadfully hungry, so we must eat something," Kitty sighed wearily. "We'll ask the next grasshopper we meet, what we can have for supper, perhaps he'll know."

"Grasshoppers are such stupid things. They can only bow and say 'No further! The Queen forbids it.' That doesn't do your appetite any good—does it?"

"Not a bit. But—look here—I believe this is the very spot where we woke up," cried Lucy. That is the tree. There are

the dead leaves we were lying on, among the wild fern."

There was no doubt they had stumbled upon the very place whence they commenced their travels; and thankful for small mercies, they sank down wearily.

"I hope we shan't die of starvation like the Babes in the Wood," said Kitty after a while. "I'm getting hungrier and hungrier."

"I hope not too," said Mary a little anxiously. "If we were our right size, we might find something eatable; but now we are such tiny things, I can't tell what is good for us and what isn't. If the fairies have made us little and brought us here, the least they might do is to feed us. It's only fair—isn't it?"

Lucy was about to express her opinion upon the mean conduct of the inhabitants of Fairyland, when there suddenly arose a great humming sound, which approached nearer and nearer, and before they could guess the cause, several bees came sailing along and dropped to the ground almost at their feet.

Kitty shrank close to Mary, evidently scared at the imposing size of the visitors, and the thought of their disagreeable habit of stinging little girls who interfered with them. She had once been stung, and the pain was bad enough then; but now that she was so ridiculously small, a similar fate would mean something very terrible indeed.

The other two were nervous also; but managed to put a bold face on the situation, so that when the bees stood up and bowed, looking rather absurd when balancing their big round bodies on their very thin hind-legs, the girls curtsied quite gracefully, the result of so much practice with the grasshoppers.

After these salutations, the new comers plucked three leaves from a tiny plant which grew close at hand, and placed upon each a share of honey. This done they stood up and bowed once more, then flying off, were quickly lost to view.

The girls had not yet recovered from their surprise, when, with a loud chirping, a little band of grasshoppers came leaping through the tall grass. These also, after

making their customary reverence, snapped off three leaves, and heaped upon each a number of yellow round things that looked not unlike French rolls, but which, of course, were a hundred times smaller, and made quite a pyramid of them upon the green plates.

Then they disappeared, returning after a while with three bright blue flowers, which they carried carefully, since each was filled with a crystal fluid, and placed beside the honey and 'French rolls.'

Their task completed, the one who had directed the operations advanced towards the girls and waved his fore-leg towards the viands.

"Supper is served! The Queen doth bid you eat," he said gravely.

"Then please tell the Queen, we are very much obliged to her," said Mary sedately; then, with a dim idea that this was a somewhat curt message to send to a royal personage, she added, rather lamely, "And tell her Majesty that we hope she is well and—and jolly."

Without further speech, the grasshoppers

bent their heads respectfully, and pranced off, leaving the girls to their novel repast.

"All this bowing and scraping has made me hungrier than ever," observed Lucy, inspecting the supper more closely.

"I wonder what sort of food it is. That's honey—or golden syrup—honey, I suppose, because the bees brought it; but I can't think what those yellow things are. It isn't bread. I don't believe grasshoppers are bakers as well as dancing-masters."

"They look more like seeds," replied Mary, taking one up and examining it doubtfully. "I wonder if they are good to eat?"

"Try," cried Kitty.

"Yes, do," said Lucy.

"You taste it first," suggested Mary.

Neither, however, seemed anxious to venture, until Lucy hit upon an idea.

"We'll all take a bite at once. That is the fairest way."

To this the others consented, and Mary having counted "One, two, three!" they all shut their eyes and took a mouthful.

No sooner had they done so than the

scared expression on their faces changed into one of great content.

"It's perfectly delicious!" exclaimed Mary in ecstasy.

"Isn't it. Better than anything I ever tasted," cried Lucy, taking a second bite.

"It makes tarts and jellies seem quite nasty. I could keep on all day," and Kitty sat down and munched as though she fully intended to prove her assertion.

"I wonder," said Mary, after they had consumed several seeds each, "whether honey would make them still nicer? I'm going to try. Fairies don't seem to use spoons, so we must dip them in."

This she proceeded to do; an example quickly followed by her sisters. They came to the conclusion that honey was the only thing required to make the meal the nicest one they ever consumed, so they continued eating until their appetites were quite satisfied.

"And now," said Lucy, "we'll try the drink part of it; and if it isn't any better than the milk and water Jane gave us, I *shall* be disappointed."

They reached out their hands to the

flowers, which in shape somewhat resembled crinkly afternoon tea-cups, and took deep draughts of the crystal fluid. It was the most delightful beverage they had ever tasted. Gingerbeer or lemonade was not to be compared to it. The liquid was perfectly clear, having a slight rosy tint, while the flavour was impossible to describe. It was as though the scent of flowers had melted into the coldest and purest water.

They sipped and sipped until not a drop remained, and then they lay back in perfect content and talked over the day's doings.

"Well, if this *is* Fairyland," remarked Lucy, "it isn't at all a bad place to live in. We never had such lovely dresses at home, did we?"

"Or such beautiful suppers," chimed in Kitty.

"And what I like is being so light. Why, we can jump feet and feet," cried Mary. "Couldn't we race Freddy now. That's another good thing in being Fairies."

"Oh! It's all very well. But are we Fairies? and where are the others?" asked her sister.

"I don't know; but they must be about

somewhere. Didn't the Queen send us eatables and drinkables."

"Besides, how could grasshoppers and bees talk and make funny little bows, if the Fairies hadn't taught them? They don't do that near us," said Kitty.

"Ah! perhaps it is because we are too big to hear and see them properly," Mary observed, "when we are our usual size."

The girls discussed the matter so earnestly that evening had fallen and the stars were twinkling before they had finished. Then the moon began to peep over a bank of trees, and rising slowly, shed her beams abroad until every blade of grass seemed dipped in silver. Soon all creatures of the night came forth. Fire-flies darted hither and thither, like shooting stars; while glow-worms, some motionless, some slowly crawling through the grass, hung out their lanterns and threw a tender radiance where the moonlight could not penetrate. Far down by the stream they could hear the croak of frogs, and overhead the rustling wings and mournful hoot of the owl, which gave Kitty no little alarm; while now and again,

rushing through the bracken, came a belated rabbit of gigantic size.

At first these unaccustomed sights and sounds kept the girls awake, but at last, one by one, they closed their eyes, and fell asleep on their leafy couch; the rustling grasses which say always 'Ssh! Ssh! Ssh!' soothing them to slumber.

CHAPTER IV.

THE THREE MORTALS WITNESS A FAIRY REVEL.

THE girls had lain asleep until the moon was almost overhead. They slept so soundly that the noises of the night had failed to rouse them; indeed to speak the truth, two of them were snoring in so unfairylike a manner, that several field-mice had come out to find the cause of all the hubbub. Presently the little animals sat up and turned their sharp eyes towards the silver-tipped grass-forest, and, after a brief hesitation, scuttled away as fast as their legs could carry them.

The reason of their flight soon became apparent. One by one there stole into the clear space where the girls were sleeping, a number of little figures hardly as tall as the children. They wore tightly fitting tunics, some of scarlet, some of green, some of a rich yellow, while their heads were covered with caps fitting closely to their

ears, and tapering to points which hung down their backs.

In the centre of the band was a little fellow whose tunic shone like silver, and who seemed to direct the movements of the rest.

"Come, you laggards!" he said softly, looking back over his shoulders. "Here's sport for you. There are the mortals fast asleep, snoring enough to shake the earth. They shall ride a nightmare ere the day doth break."

"Did not the Queen say none shall molest them?" said another sprite to him in the silver white tunic.

"We'll not molest them," he cried, "but give them much to think about. They are our sport for all the Queen may say. Come, all of you. To work, and wake them gently."

In a few moments the bracken and tall grass which waved over the sleepers, were peopled with sprites, who, under their leader's direction, plucked long strips from the leaves, and dangled them until they passed lightly to and fro over the girls' faces.

Kitty was the first to stir. She brushed

the grass away with her hand, without opening her eyes; but as it always returned, she murmured, still half asleep, "You're over my side, Lucy. Your hair is tickling my nose."

By this time both the others were stirring uneasily, having been roused in the same way; and Lucy replied sleepily, "I'm not; yours is tickling mine."

"And mine too," grumbled Mary.

At that instant, there came a series of chuckles.

"Don't laugh, you two," she added fretfully. "Why don't you go to sleep?"

"I wasn't laughing," protested Lucy.

"And I wasn't either," echoed Kitty. "It was you, Mary."

"I beg your pardon. There! who was that?" she inquired, as the subdued merriment broke out again. "Somebody is."

By this time all three were thoroughly awake. They sat up and looked about them; but although the mocking laughter rang out louder and louder, they could see nothing.

Then, from some hidden spot, a clear shrill treble broke into song, while at certain

intervals, a chorus of voices took up the refrain.

The whole effect was so uncanny that the listeners crept closer together, frightened, not only by the weirdness of the chant, but also by the fact that it referred to themselves in a most unpleasant and threatening manner.

The high treble voice commenced thus—

“What is the fate of these mortals three?

Sing, my brothers, all—sing.

Will the Queen punish or set them free?

Sing, my brothers, all—sing.”

Then the chorus broke the momentary silence—

“They shall be left on a desert plain,

Ho! ho!

Where clouds ne’er gather—where falls no rain,

Ho! ho!

To thirst for water and thirst in vain,

Ho! ho! Ha! ha! Ho! ho!”

A mad burst of laughter followed, but stopped instantly as the first voice again rang out:

“What is the fate of these mortals three?
Sing, my brothers, all—sing.
Will the Queen punish or set them free?
Sing, my brothers, all—sing.”

For the second time the chorus of unseen beings chanted back the answer:

They shall be bound to the giant oak,
Ho! ho!
Where night hawks gather and ravens croak,
Ho! ho!
Where sun will blister and storm will soak,
Ho! ho! Ha! ha! Ho! ho!

For the third time, above the din of elfish laughter, the single voice made its appeal—

“What is the fate of these mortals three?
Sing, my brothers, all—sing.
Will the Queen punish or set them free?
Sing, my brothers, all—sing.”

And once more, with dreadful distinctness, the girls heard the reply—

“They shall be thrust in the Ant Queen’s cell,
Ho! ho!
Hidden from woodland, field or fell,
Ho! ho!
In the dark, cold earth for ever dwell,
Ho! ho! Ha! ha! Ho! ho!”

The chorus finished with screams of wild merriment, which grew fainter and fainter as the elves dashed off through the undergrowth. When the last echo had died away, the girls looked at each other with white, scared faces.

"I suppose we are the three mortals?" observed Mary gravely.

"I suppose so," sighed Lucy. "And who were they?"

"Fairies—at least I think so. I couldn't see them—could you?"

"No. But I heard them and that was quite enough."

"I should think it was!" cried Kitty, with a little shiver. "Do you—do you really think all these horrid things are going to happen?"

This was a question which neither Mary nor Lucy quite knew how to answer.

"I don't know why it should happen. What have we done?" was Lucy's plaintive question. "Of course, we're not very good girls; but even Miss Harbutt wouldn't punish us like that."

"We—we haven't seen anything of our

dolls since we came here, have we?" remarked Mary, apparently changing the subject. "They must be somewhere about."

"But you don't want to see them—do you?" asked Kitty.

"N—no. Only I can't help thinking that our dolls must be Fairies in disguise."

"Well, and—suppose they are?" cried Lucy. "W—w—what are you thinking about, Mary?" she asked tremblingly, seeing a very serious look on her sister's face.

"I'm thinking how badly we treated them."

"Do—do Fairies feel the same as we do?" asked Lucy again.

"I suppose so."

"When they are dolls?"

"I suppose so."

"Do you think they felt all the darts and all the thumps, Mary?" wailed Kitty.

"I suppose so. And—and I *was* fond of Belinda," cried the elder girl, with a burst. "If I had only known, I wouldn't have hurt her for anything."

"And I was fond of Juliana, too. Poor thing!" added Lucy, with a little sob.

"And I cut off Ophelia's leg. Oh! I *was*

a brute," whispered Kitty. "We ought to apologise, you know. That's the least we can do."

"I'm afraid it's too late now," said Mary, shaking her head. "You see our dolls were Fairies—at least I'm afraid so—and we ill-used them. So now it's their turn to ill-use us. That is natural, isn't it?"

"But you don't think they'll throw darts at us or—or burn us—do you?" And Lucy cowered down beside her sister as though for protection.

"I shouldn't think so. Fairies aren't Red Indians."

"C—c—couldn't we go home, Mary?" wailed Kitty, around whom her sister had thrown a protecting arm. "Fairyland is such a 'creepy' place; I don't like it a bit."

"You see home is a long way from here, and we don't know the way. But we needn't be afraid," she added, trying to seem more hopeful than she really was. "After all we're only girls, and Fairies are supposed to be good people."

"I know they are; but if it turns out that story books are all wrong, and they're

spiteful things—what shall we do?" cried Lucy, rising to her feet, with a shudder. "I can't go to sleep any more, so let's try if we can't get away. P'r'aps all the grasshoppers are asleep and won't notice us."

This suggestion having met with everybody's approval, was promptly acted upon, and the three girls set out, hoping to effect their escape.

Instead of descending towards the stream, they kept on the higher ground and made for a wood which stood out dark and forbidding against the starry sky. Although their hearts fluttered a good deal at the prospect of plunging into its shadowy depths, it offered at least a more secure hiding-place than the open country; and might possibly bring them to a less dangerous spot.

They advanced with much caution, Mary leading, and had reached the first line of trees which towered above them like ghostly giants, without any molestation. Hitherto they had followed a plainly marked track, but as they went deeper into the forest, a glimmer of light in front made

them leave it hastily, and proceed with stealthy steps through the longer grass. As the girls advanced, they found that the light they had seen was only one of many, which spread out at regular distances like a line of sentinels. They crept closer, and found that each lamp was a glow-worm, beside whom was a grasshopper, standing motionless and watchful.

It was plainly useless to try to pass the guards without being challenged, and so the girls crawled along out of sight, expecting before long to reach the end of them. They had not gone far before they noticed that there was a space of considerable distance separating two of the lights. This was a chance for which they had been looking, and Mary having enjoined the strictest silence, in a whisper, slowly crept closer to the unguarded place.

The girls had almost passed inside the lines when their leader paused suddenly and held up a warning hand. Peering through the darkness, they could just see the reason for this gap in the illumination. The glow-worm had hidden its lamp, by curling up

and going to sleep, while the sentinel grasshopper was making a pillow of its companion and breathing heavily.

"They are fast asleep, both of them," muttered Mary. "We can get through here. For goodness' sake don't make a noise, or we shall wake them up."

The girls flitted by like shadows, never speaking until they were sure the sentries were out of earshot.

"We were lucky," cried Lucy at last. "I hope that glow-worm will have nice dreams, and the grasshopper too. I'm sure they deserve it."

"And I suppose we are out of the Fairy Country now?" said Kitty, a little doubtfully; "or they wouldn't put sentries there."

"We'll hope so," answered Mary. "Although I— Look there! We are right in the middle of them."

To the deep disappointment of the wanderers, they found, on mounting higher ground, that the guards were placed in a complete circle, through which they had broken, so that, so far as escape was concerned, they were as badly off as ever.

"It was your fault, Mary," said Kitty resentfully; "you brought us here. We had better have stayed where we were, ever so much."

"No, we hadn't," observed Lucy sharply. "Anything is better than sitting still doing nothing. Besides, I believe something is going on in that hollow down there. P'r'aps it's a Fairy party," she added. "Fancy seeing a Fairy party! Why, it's worth going thousands of miles! Come along. Let us get closer."

Kitty's complaints were instantly hushed; and for a few moments they stood listening and staring with all their eyes. Although the undergrowth somewhat spoilt the view, they could see on the smooth turf below them, a number of figures about their own size. Some were lying down, others, with entwining arms, were strolling about in twos and threes, while many more were running swiftly from place to place, pursued or pursuing, as though engaged in some pastime.

"It's more like a Sunday-school treat," whispered Mary as they descended; "only I can't see any tea or buns."

“And Sunday-school treats always happen on wet days, not on fine nights,” replied Lucy, who had suffered more than one sad experience. “You ask Aunt Fanny if I’m not right.”

Kitty was about to add her share to the argument, when she was pulled down behind a tuft of grass quite suddenly, only just in time to escape the eyes of four or five Fairies, who passed lightly along quite close to them. After this fright, they approached the open glade in silence, and with the utmost caution, and before long found an admirable hiding-place, whence they could obtain a splendid view of the Fairy camp.

Everyone, or nearly everyone, seemed to be in the highest spirits, and peals of silvery laughter rang out from all sides.

Most of the Fairies were dressed in the same sort of gauzy, silken robes which clothed the girls, although not one seemed quite the same colour. They all looked very beautiful in the soft light, with their loose flowing hair, a delicate flush on their faces, and a happy light in their eyes. It seemed ridiculous to suppose these amiable little

people would behave as cruelly as the unknown voices foretold, so that the girls took heart of grace and eagerly watched the novel scene.

Although most of the revellers appeared to be girls, there were a sprinkling of little fellows in tight tunics, who were always with the noisier groups, rushing hither and thither, with shrill cries and boisterous merriment. Foremost among these, was a sprite whose dress appeared richer than the rest, and who seemed to be the leader of the games.

He ran from one place to another with incredible swiftness, and wherever he went there followed bursts of laughter or playful cries of reproof.

For some time he kept away from the spot where the girls were concealed, but suddenly, as though seeing a fresh field for his pranks, he raced across the sward, only stopping at the foot of their sheltering tree.

“Why are you three so sad?”

The question was put so suddenly that, for a moment, the girls thought this sprite had discovered them. By craning their

necks, however, they found he was addressing three fairies who were reclining close at hand, and whose silence had kept them unnoticed.

"We're sad, Sir Puck, because sad deeds will soon be done," came the reply in a voice that the girls seemed to remember.

"Sad deeds—what deeds?"

"We fear the Queen will punish the three mortals more than they deserve."

"More! Why, that can't be," cried the sprite contemptuously. "They're monsters, worse than ordinary mortals. Think how you suffered when you went to earth and took the form of dolls." Here the girls started violently. "The names that you were called—'Ophelia', that's not bad; but 'Juliana'—there's a name; and then 'Belin—da'." Here the boy shuddered. "'Be—lin—da'. It twists my tongue to speak it."

By this time the listeners, who were certainly not likely to hear any good of themselves, had clutched each other tightly and were listening intently to every word.

"The names are harmless. You cannot

blame them for the names," urged one of the three fairies.

"Should not I. Though Wildrose, Primrose and Mossrose have not so barbarous a sound," said the sprite, with a mocking bow. "But since you went to earth for their good pleasure, these children should, in very gratitude, have shewn you every kindness and much tenderness."

"And so they did sometimes," said the one who answered to the name of Wildrose.

"Sometimes!" cried the sprite scornfully. "Was it kind to leave you in a box to lie for years; to paint your faces, pierce you with darts, and hurl you from them as I throw pebbles in the stream?"

Here Mary's arm was clutched both by Lucy and Kitty, who had become very restless and eager to defend themselves.

"But how should they know better?" pleaded the fairy doll. "They loved us just as mothers do, at first, and only lost their love when our poor limbs grew loose, our hair fell off, and our sweet pink complexions faded."

"Besides," chimed in Mossrose, who was once Ophelia. "To them we were but wax and wood and sawdust. Things without sense or feeling. Had they known, they would have been more kind. I'm sure of it."

"And so am I," said Primrose, the third fairy, earnestly.

"And so am I," cried Wildrose.

"Ah! you always were too tender-hearted," said Puck, with an impatient stamp. "Meet good with good, say I, and ill with ill. Oh! I hate cruelty."

"And yet you would be cruel to these mortals," said Wildrose reproachfully.

"Yes, because of all the wrongs they worked on you," he cried passionately. "It should go hard with them, were I their judge. Their evil deeds should turn and sting them, like a swarm of wasps." A remark that made three pairs of eyes glare at him defiantly.

"Puck! Puck! your words are harder than your thoughts," said Wildrose in gentle reproof, rising and flinging her arms round the sprite. "Tell me," she added coaxingly: "What says the Queen about the matter?"

But Puck drew himself up with a funny little air of dignity, and refused to answer.

"State secrets. So I must hold my tongue," he said pompously.

"At least you'll promise this: that you will plead to her on their behalf? She listens more to you than to anyone," begged Wildrose, in such a pretty imploring tone that it seemed irresistible.

"Plead for them—I?" cried the boy in amazement.

"For our sakes, Puck. Do! please do!" cried the three fairies. "Promise! Promise!"

"I'll promise—nothing," he replied, his eyes twinkling wickedly. "I do not think I'll budge so much on their behalf," and he held up his finger to shew how small was the help he would give.

"But listen!" he exclaimed, standing motionless for a few moments. "The Queen is coming. Away to give her greeting!"

Puck hastened off, glad enough to escape from the pleading of the three fairy dolls, who slowly wended their way towards a part of the dell which the girls had not before noticed.

Here stood a canopy, made of some semi-transparent, silken drapery of so tender and changeful a hue that it might have been dyed in liquid opal. It was stretched across the lowest boughs of a sapling oak, and hung down in graceful folds, which were looped back to the right and left of a raised seat covered with the same material.

Both sides of the canopy were studded with fire-flies, so that the throne, although shaded from the moon, was bathed in the radiance which scintillated from these countless lights.

The fairies had gathered in groups, awaiting the appearance of their Queen, leaving the girls to talk in whispers without fear of being overheard.

"Did you listen to what they were talking about—those three dears!" said Lucy.

"Of course I did. And did you hear who they were?" came from Mary in a low tone.

"They were our dolls. And to think how we treated them," sighed Kitty. "There aren't three wickedder girls in the whole world," she added, with a catch in her breath.

"Oh! If we could only have known!" groaned Mary. "And to think that after all they are taking our part. I could hug Belin—I beg her pardon—Wildrose."

"And so could I," echoed Kitty.

"And, oh for goodness! I could hug them all! cried Lucy, with a burst of enthusiasm. "All except Puck. A spiteful little thing. Did you recognize his voice?"

"I believe I have heard it before," said Mary thoughtfully.

"And so have I. He was the one that sang that horrid song about what was going to happen to us."

"So it was!" exclaimed Kitty. "But who were the rest who joined in the chorus?"

"Those sprites, or elves, or whatever they are," said Mary. "I don't believe any of the girl fairies would do anything like that; they look too nice."

A stir among the crowd at the foot of the throne arrested their attention, and the faint sounds of music somewhere in the forest held them silent. It was so beautifully soft and sweet that the girls listened spellbound. There seemed many instruments,

although not in the least like any of the kind they had ever heard; while, strangely enough, the melody they were playing, struck them as familiar.

It came closer and closer, the joyous strains swelling as the unseen musicians advanced, until the girls were speechless with delight and wonder.

At last they saw Puck dart through the leafy screen, and the fairies, with one accord, drop on to one knee. Then, suddenly, the players came into sight, walking two and two. Some held small harps with strings stolen from the webs of spiders; others carried reed instruments made from the hollow stems of grasses; while a few shook strings of golden bells which rang out in varying notes from treble to mellow tenor. The performers ceased playing and ranged themselves on either side of the throne, and were followed by important-looking persons with long white wands. These having also taken their places beside the Queen's dais, there came a sudden burst of music, and the Queen herself passed into the fairy circle.

She was leaning on Puck's shoulder, but paused to bow in answer to the kneeling figures; motioning them to rise. Then with her white robes shimmering in the soft light, she passed beneath the canopy and sank back upon her throne.

So sweet and gracious an appearance did the fairy ruler present that the girls fell in love with her at once.

If the fairies were beautiful, their Queen was infinitely more so. Every movement was perfectly graceful; while her delicate oval face shaded by masses of fair hair, and her soft, deep, tender eyes so sad and wistful, made her a magnet to their gaze.

"Isn't she sweet!" whispered Mary, with great fervour. "I'd like to kiss her."

"So would I!" echoed Lucy. "She is too nice for anything."

At that moment they saw Wildrose advance to the steps of the throne and throw out her hands imploringly towards the Queen.

"What would you, sister?" asked her Majesty, speaking quietly, but in tones as clear as a bell.

"Grant me a favour, Queen. I crave

to speak of those earth children, prisoners here."

"I beg you cease. I can do nothing yet," came the reply. "There are the laws, and by those laws they must be judged. But rest assured that mercy shall stand side by side with justice. Your heart fears for them, and mine is heavy too. Come, sisters," she added, waving her hand, "help me to forget the cares of state. Laugh! Sing! Dance! I'm heavy with forebodings. Let gay music bring me better cheer."

At a sign from the Queen the musicians began to play once more.

It was a dance measure so gay and tripping that the girls' feet began to move unconsciously, and it was only by an effort that they abstained from leaving their shelter, and joining the band of Fairies who had formed into line before the throne.

The dance which they now witnessed was so dainty, so rich in graceful circlings and wonderful steps, that the mortals were perfectly astonished. The performers scarcely seemed to touch the ground, so lightly and easily did they move. Their waving arms

seemed like wings upon which they floated; and as they swept here and there, sometimes in one long line, sometimes weaving mazy figures, now quickly and gaily, and now with greater stateliness, Mary and her sisters thought they had never seen anything half as beautiful.

"Well," said the eldest girl, with a sigh of content when the dance had finished, "I will never go to another pantomime as long as I live; I wouldn't enjoy it a bit after seeing this."

"Ah! These are real Fairies, and that makes all the difference," observed Lucy.

"I wonder if they would teach us some of the steps?" pondered Kitty. "Shouldn't we astonish them when we got home?"

At that moment the Queen, who was smiling for the first time, beckoned Puck to approach.

"What think you of the dance, my pretty Puck?" she asked.

"Oh! 'tis well enough," said the pert boy, shrugging his shoulders; "but I've seen better."

"Better! Nothing so full of grace, I vow," cried the Queen surprised.

"Oh yes! The swallow's flight; the flash of dragon-fly across a pool; the trembling lark just as he drops to nest. There's grace indeed, to which this dance is but the gambol of some mortal clowns," he added mischievously.

"Oh fie! rude boy. There's malice on your tongue," said her Majesty in gentle reproof.

"Not malice, Queen; unless the truth be such."

"Nay; your malice hides the truth. Come make your peace, and give your sisters their just due."

Bounding to his feet, the sprite advanced to the dancers, who had heard his speech, and bowed low.

"Sisters" he said, "you dance as light as any thistledown. You tread on air. Your grace is grace indeed."

"You think so, Puck?" cried several, gathering round him.

"I speak as I am told to speak, but think—" and he glanced wickedly at the expectant faces.

“Well—well—”

“Just the reverse of what I say.”

On the instant a dozen Fairies held him in their grasp; but, with a shrill laugh, he broke away, darting off towards the undergrowth, while the rest followed in pursuit.

But this by no means brought the revels to an end.

Before long another band of Fairies delighted the girls with their entrancing movements. When these had finished, some score of the others took their places, and sang a glee in their silvery voices, the words and music of which startled the girls as being somehow familiar, although it sounded infinitely more melodious.

“It’s a very funny thing,” whispered Mary, when the last notes had died away. “But I’ve heard that before.”

“Don’t you remember it? ‘Ye spotted snakes with double tongue. Ye—spotted—’ Where *have* I heard it?”

“I’ve heard it too—and read it,” mused Lucy.

“And I’ve heard the music they played

when the Queen came in," exclaimed Kitty, in a most excited state, "but I can't think when it was," and she clutched her head to assist her memory.

"I know!" cried Mary triumphantly. "It was on the organ, when Uncle Bob was married. It's the 'Wedding March'."

"Oh for goodness! So it is," said Lucy. "And that chorus—why, they sing it at the Choral Society."

"Then I wonder where Fairies heard it?" said Mary, with a puzzled air. "Please pinch me again. I'm so mixed up with things."

"I suppose the Fairies must have been to one of the concerts," suggested Kitty, "and that is where they learned it."

"Well, I hope they enjoyed themselves; I didn't," remarked Lucy decidedly, "because the choir were always out of tune. They should hear the Fairies sing it, and then they would never try again," a criticism not entirely undeserved.

Just then Puck again appeared, sidling to the Queen's side with so demure and innocent an air that the girls could scarcely refrain from laughing. But he was promptly

accused and found guilty of unmannerly behaviour, and amid peals of merriment was sentenced to dance as a punishment.

The fairies gathered in a circle, while the sprite called all his companions to his aid. Then at a sign from the Queen, the musicians began a wild, strange melody, that tripped and paused, now rushing along in a torrent of sound, now lingering on long drawn notes; at times full of mystery, anon rippling with gaiety and lightsomeness.

To this curious accompaniment Puck and his companion elves danced as though possessed. Their restless feet were never still for a moment, moving so fast that the eye could scarcely follow them. They sprang in the air, darted hither and thither, swayed and wheeled with linked arms, performing all kinds of fantastic tricks, although every movement was in harmony with the music.

So inspiriting was the sight that the mortals felt their blood dancing in their veins, and they were filled with longings to join in the mad revel.

Even the Queen seemed to feel the influence of the scene, and a soft flush of

pleasure dyed her cheeks, as she watched the whirling sprites in their wild dance; and when it was over and Puck had thrown himself breathless at her feet, she smilingly stooped and kissed him on both cheeks.

"Indeed, we must punish you again," she said. "The penalty gives pleasure to us all. I love to watch you in these saucy pranks."

"'Tis nothing to what we could do, and we would," answered the Fairy boy, with a pretty air of conceit. "This is the overture before the play begins."

"Then we will have the play anon. Meanwhile rest a little."

So the summer night passed away, to the entire satisfaction of the girls. Dance followed dance, each one better than the last; the melodies from the Fairy musicians stole through the wood, shaming the very birds with tunefulness; and when the choir poured forth their songs, it was as though they heard the beating heart of music itself.

Indeed, so quickly passed the time, that it was with a pang of regret the girls saw the chill light of morning, paling the soft radiance of the glow-worms and their allies,

and heard a blast from the fairy trumpeter to herald the day.

“The dawn has come. Now openeth each flower.
The sun is nigh. Haste to our Fairy bower.”

So sang the whole concourse; and then suddenly the Queen and her subjects, Puck and his sprites, vanished, and the girls found themselves alone, with only the fairy ring to remind them of the wondrous revels.

CHAPTER V.

THE RESCUE OF PUCK.

SINCE the guards who, on the previous night, had kept watch and ward, were now dispersed, the girls had no difficulty in returning to their resting-place. Their long vigil in the hollow tree and their double journey had made them hungry and tired, so it was with great relief that they found a further supply of honey and seed and dew had been left during their absence.

"Whatever the Fairies are going to do to us," cried Mary, "they certainly don't mean us to starve."

"That's a comfort, anyhow," observed Lucy, helping herself. "Starving must be a horrid way of punishing people."

"I wonder," cried Kitty, "what *will* happen to us? Do you think it will be anything very nasty?" she added, with a shade of fear in her voice.

"I don't suppose so. At least, nothing very

dreadful," answered Mary stoutly. "Fairies seem to be such jolly little people. If only they would be nice and friendly and let us join in the dances and things, I should like to stop here for ever. As for the Queen, she's an angel! I should never get tired of looking at her."

"And don't they all speak funnily," remarked Lucy, helping herself liberally to honey. "It's as though they were trying to talk some sort of poetry—you know; poetry that doesn't rhyme."

"I don't suppose they can help it," said Kitty. "It's the way they have been brought up. We should do it too, if we had been taught. Wouldn't it astonish Freddy to hear us say, 'Freddy, I beg you pass the salt'; or instead of saying, 'It's time to get up,' tell him, 'The dawn has come, I pray you, brother, rise'," and then all laughed heartily at the thought of Freddy's face on hearing so remarkable a method of talking.

"But it really is the strangest thing to find our dolls were fairies," broke in Lucy, gravely. "If we had only known."

"But how could we know?" said Kitty

helplessly. "They weren't a bit like Fairies, were they? Somebody ought to have told us."

"Considering what we did to them, they are the most forgiving darlings that ever lived," cried Mary. "To think that they should take our part after all. I'm sure if they had treated us as we treated them, we should just love to be spiteful and nasty."

"I'm afraid we should," said Lucy; "but that's because we are only naughty girls and not Fairies."

"But Puck is a Fairy, and he is as bad as we are," sighed Kitty. "He is simply horrid!"

"Ah! but he's a boy Fairy. I suppose that accounts for it," observed Mary. "It's his nature to be disagreeable."

"Do you think he means everything he says, or is it only teasing?" asked Kitty anxiously.

"Oh! I daresay he's only trying to be funny, and to make other people miserable—that's a boy's way. I don't believe he really wants all those horrible things to happen to us," replied Mary, who felt it her duty, as an elder sister, to look on the bright side

of things. "Besides it is no use worrying. I'm not going to believe that Fairies are any worse than Miss Harbutt—or half as bad. They don't even shut us up or give us plain teas." A reflection which was cordially echoed by Lucy and Kitty.

After a hearty meal, the girls curled themselves up under the shady leaves of the bracken, and quickly fell asleep.

When they awoke, the sun was already sinking behind the tree beneath which they lay, and its shadows stretched across the open glade to the wood where they witnessed the Fairy revels on the previous evening.

"It's a very funny thing," said Mary when they were all once more wide awake, "but everything is topsy-turvy. We are always dreadfully sleepy about this time at home, but here we're just getting up."

"P'r'aps it's Australia," suggested Kitty; "things are all upside down there."

"No, it isn't," replied Lucy decidedly, "because we haven't seen a gum tree or a kangaroo."

"Anyhow I can't sleep any more," cried Mary, jumping up gaily. "So let us go back

to the wood. I daresay the Queen will give another party to-night, and I wouldn't miss it for anything."

The chance of once more becoming spectators at so delightful a function was not to be lost, and the trio hastened off to seek their old hiding-place.

Although they advanced with much caution, no opposition was met with. The sentries possibly were not on duty until darkness had closed in, or perhaps after all the wood was inside the bounds beyond which they were not allowed to wander. In any case they dived in between the trees without a single polite grasshopper appearing to turn them back.

The open glade where the festivities had been held, was found without difficulty; but not a sign of Queen or Court was there. It was silent and deserted, save for the sleepy notes of a few birds nesting overhead, and the faint hum of insects.

"It's no good stopping here if there is nothing to see," remarked Kitty, a little fretfully.

"Oh! But there will be presently," re-

plied Mary; "it's too early yet. I expect the Fairies are all in bed. They only get up with the moon, I suppose."

"Then we had better go for a walk," suggested Lucy. "We haven't seen much of the wood, and we can come back when it's dark."

As waiting promised to be weary work, the three girls wandered off deeper into the wood.

The first feeling of wonder at finding everything so much larger than they were accustomed to, had not yet worn off, and at every turn there came an exclamation from one or the other, as each discovered some familiar object magnified to a surprising size. It was a most astonishing experience to pass through grass breast high, which only a day or two before they would have trampled under foot. They found too, new and wonderful kinds of flowers, which in their ordinary state had escaped their notice. The common grasses they knew, waved boldly in the faint breeze, rustling and shaking their clustering seed pods, like enormous ears of corn; while beneath these



*Some famillar object magnified to a
surprising size*

giants grew tiny flowers, exquisite in their varied shapes and colours, flourishing here amid strange plants with foliage of bronze or deep red or emerald green.

Hiding beneath these unknown growths were insects, the like of which the girls had never seen. Some were beautiful in form and colour, others grotesque or ugly; but all, apparently, harmless, and quite indifferent to the trespassers on their domain.

The three wandered on delighted and interested in this new world they had discovered, plucking handfuls of unknown flowers and grasses, or stopping to watch some strange creature as it flew or hopped or crawled across their path.

The sun had set, and the warm light was fading from the sky before the girls thought of returning.

"We had better go back now," said Mary at last, "or it will be too dark for us to find our way."

"Oh! there is plenty of time yet," grumbled Lucy, who was enjoying herself immensely. "It's so jolly here, and it won't be dark for ever so long."

"Yes, it will," persisted Mary. "Besides we can dawdle going back."

They turned round, and leisurely retraced their steps, finding something queer or new in every yard they traversed, although they had not found any trace of the Fairies.

"I wonder where they do hide in the day-time?" asked Kitty. "They must be somewhere. Do you think they have houses or anything?"

"Houses!"—and Lucy sniffed contemptuously. "Who ever heard of Fairy houses? Fancy Fairies living in desirable residences," she added, quoting from the advertisements in the daily paper, "with all the modern improvements. Five minutes' walk from a railway station. What rubbish!"

"But they can't be always out of doors. Suppose it rains," persisted Kitty, who was rather worrying at times; "they would catch cold and things like that."

"Oh, they crawl into flowers, or under leaves, I suppose," replied Lucy impatiently.

"But there aren't any flowers in the winter—at least not many."

"Well, then they—they go to sleep with

the bees—"Don't bother," snapped her sister who hated to be asked questions she was unable to answer.

Kitty was about to continue 'bothering', when a piercing cry, rang out suddenly, coming from a spot to the right of them.

They stopped and looked at each other with frightened faces. Again the cry rang out piteously. It was a boy's voice, full of pain and terror.

"Help! Oh! help!"

"Who is it?" gasped Kitty, clinging to Mary's arm.

"It's somebody being hurt," was the breathless reply.

"Help! help!"—and now the cry was a little fainter.

"It's dreadful," cried Kitty. "Let us go and see what the matter is."

There was a moment's hesitation; but as the pitiful wail broke the silence once more, Mary's feelings were too much for her and she dashed off in the direction of the sound, followed closely by her sisters.

In spite of the tangled undergrowth which

impeded their progress they soon came quite near to the place whence the sounds proceeded; and, having emerged from behind a tree they came upon a sight which made them turn cold with terror.

Stretched across some bracken was a huge spider's web, and close by was the owner, a great, brown, hairy monster looking, to them, as big, as a dog. He was making a strange, horrible sound, not unlike the fierce undertone of an angry cat, before it springs, and in the clutch of his long skinny arms an Elf was struggling helplessly. The girls recognised him in a moment.

It was Puck.

They hung back, rooted to the ground with fear, watching the unequal struggle, not daring to shew themselves. Inch by inch, the cruel brute dragged his prey towards the web, while the Elf, mad with terror and spent for breath, cried in weak accents for aid.

"We can't stand still and do nothing," cried Mary at last. "We must beat him with sticks or something. I don't care if he does hurt us."



An elf was struggling helplessly.

“Oh! yes! yes!” said Lucy. “And we’ll shout. That might frighten him.”

“But—but oh! I’m so afraid of spiders,” wailed Kitty, putting her hands over her eyes to shut out the dreadful sight.

“Don’t be a baby! He isn’t nearly as big as we are,” said Mary, resolutely plucking a stem of grass in frantic haste. “While we wait, Puck is being killed. Don’t let us be cowards.”

However fearful Kitty and Lucy might feel at attacking so horrible an enemy, Mary’s boldness reassured them, and arming themselves in like manner to their sister, they awaited her lead.

Puck was growing weaker and weaker, his cries being now scarcely audible, and the sight of the pretty boy at the mercy of this terrible creature gave them the boldness of desperation.

At a given signal the three girls dashed out from behind the tree, waving the long flexible stalks, which were likely to be formidable weapons from a spider’s point of view, and shouting in shrill tones.

Hearing the noise, Puck’s captor ceased

his efforts, and faced the girls, snarling ominously. Nothing daunted, however, Mary flourished aloft her stalk and brought it down heavily on the spider's arm, while Lucy vigorously banged him about his repulsive head.

"Leave go, you ugly thing! Leave go!" shouted Mary.

"Let him alone, you horrid wretch," cried Lucy. "Beat him, Kitty! Beat him!"

"I am beating him. Take that—and that—and that," and the child brandishing her weapon, brought it down again and again on the spider's plump, hairy body.

This vigorous and sustained onslaught, made him loose his hold of Puck, who sank exhausted to the ground. But with a hoarse growl of rage he dashed at Kitty and nipped her by the leg. At this, however, Mary and Lucy beat him so hard and shouted so loudly, almost drowning Kitty's shrill cries, that fear got the better of his rage, and he turned tail, ran nimbly up the threads of his web and took refuge under a leaf high above their reach.

"You cruel thing!" said Lucy, shaking

her stalk at him as he peered from behind his shelter, rolling his horrid protruding eyes, which glared with baffled spite. "If you touch Puck again, we will beat you black and blue, and break your web for you. So don't you dare to come near us again."

The only answer was a growl of defiance, and the girl turned to her sisters, who were bending over the prostrate elf.

"Is he hurt much?" asked Lucy anxiously.

"I don't think so. But dreadfully frightened," answered Mary.

"We'll carry him away out of sight of the spider. He will soon be better then."

It was not a difficult task to lift the boy and take him away from the scene of his misfortune; and this done, Puck opened his eyes and looked round wildly.

"You're not hurt—are you?" said Mary soothingly. "Don't tremble so. You're safe with us."

"The spider ran away. He won't hurt you now," added Lucy.

"Has—he—really gone?" asked the Elf, glancing round fearfully.

"Indeed he has, and glad to get away."

We gave him *such* a beating. Why should he hurt you, Puck?" asked the eldest girl.

"Because a pretty moth, a friend of mine, was in his web; and so I snapped some threads and set her free."

"I suppose that made him angry?" said Lucy.

"I should think it did. He vowed he'd kill me if I came his way. And thus to-night he took me unawares, and had you not been there—Why!—why, you're the mortals!" and the boy, with a cry of fear, sprang to his feet and edged away from them.

"Well, if we are?" queried Mary, puzzled at the Elf's sudden change of manner.

"Why did you come to help me?" he asked, still drawing away from her.

"Why? Because you were being hurt."

"But then I thought you loved all kinds of cruelty—that you were spiders on two legs."

"Excuse me, but we are nothing of the kind," exclaimed Lucy indignantly. "We're only ordinary girls who don't like cruelty at all. Spiders, indeed!" and she tossed her

head in protest at such an unjust charge.

"And don't like giving pain?" he asked, still unconvinced.

"You are very rude. Of course we don't," cried Kitty angrily.

"And I must say you don't look like spiders," remarked the Elf, coming closer and peering into their faces. "You have kind eyes—indeed, you're rather pretty," he added with an air of condescension.

"It's very good of you to say so, I'm sure," observed Mary, mollified by his flattery.

"Besides, you must be kind, or why should you have rescued me?" Puck went on. "I'm very grateful to you all. I—I do believe I've wronged you in my thoughts. So there's a kiss of peace—and there—and there," and as he spoke he stood on tiptoe and gravely kissed each child on the cheek. "Now may you say that Puck's your friend, and soon, alas! you may have need of him. Why, even now I break the Queen's commands in speaking to you," he continued gravely.

"But why? what have we done?" begged Mary.

There was a slight pause, and then the Elf asked mysteriously,

"Is it true that you are very naughty girls?"

"Oh yes! that's true enough," laughed Mary.

"And that you were cruel to your fairy dolls?"

"Well, I'm afraid we were," replied Mary more soberly. "But then we didn't know they were Fairies, or we wouldn't have hurt them for anything."

"Of course, we wouldn't," interrupted Lucy. "It was all a mistake."

"Then this mistake is like to cost you dear," said Puck sadly. "For soon you will be tried by Fairy Law."

"But what have we done? Why should we be tried?" asked Kitty.

"I must not speak of it," replied the Elf. "But later, when the trial is at hand, I'll tell you all and aid you, if I can. Meanwhile don't mope or fume, or let black care hold sway. Keep lightsome hearts. Bid trouble stand aside."

"Oh! It's all very well. First of all you

tell us of the trial, and then you tell us to forget it," said Mary reproachfully. "Besides, there is that horrid chorus you sang the other night, after waking us up."

"Ah! think no more of it," laughed Puck. "The spirit of mischief was abroad and swept us in his train."

"Then—then you are quite sure nothing like that will happen to us?" asked Kitty nervously. "We shan't be starved or roasted or frozen, shall we?"

"It was an idle song to scare you out of sleep, and nothing more," he answered. "Now listen. Henceforth I'm your friend, so every Elf is also on your side. The three Roses, for all your base neglect, do love you still and long to tell you so. To-night the Queen holds Court, so must we all appear; but when to-morrow comes, I'll meet you here, at setting sun."

"Will you really?" asked Mary delighted.

"And bring the Fairies who were once your dolls. Then will we wander forth and see such sights as mortals never saw. Deep in the Earth we'll go, or high in air, or in the water. We'll have such sport that you

shall think of nothing else, and have no fear of any future woes. What say you?"

"Oh! It would be jolly," cried Kitty, clapping her hands excitedly. "I'd like it tremendously.

"Of course we'll come. It's just the very thing we've longed for," said Mary. "Oh! you are a nice boy."

"And now I go. The Queen awaits me," said Puck. "She cannot bear to find me absent from her side. Besides, I've promised her to dance. You never saw me dance?" he asked, with an important air.

"Indeed we did—last night," replied Mary. "It's the most wonderful dancing I ever saw."

"Oh, that was nothing," he said, with a careless gesture. "You shall come to-night—I'll find a hiding-place—and then you'll say 'tis wonderful indeed. Come, I'll lead you there." Without awaiting a reply, the Elf turned and sped through the forest at breakneck speed, followed by the breathless girls. In a few moments he stopped and held up his hand for silence, and then pointed to a clump of broad-leaved plants

which grew on the outskirts of the Fairy ring.

"Lie there," he whispered, "and keep strict silence, so none will guess your presence. Good night! Remember—to-morrow, at the setting of the sun. I will not fail you."

"Oh, we shall be there, Puck. Good-night. And we are so much obliged to you," said Mary in a low tone.

"I should think we were. Good-night, Puck," echoed the others. The Elf's reply was a quaint bow, and in a moment he had vanished, leaving the girls to hug themselves with the thought that they had turned a most potent enemy into a fast friend.

CHAPTER VI.

PUCK TAKES THE MORTALS ON A FAIRY VOYAGE.

THE Fairy revels, which the three mortals were privileged to witness, were even more strange and beautiful than on the previous night. The music seemed sweeter, and the dancing still more delightful, while Puck, surpassed himself in the wonderful lightness and grace of his movements.

At the first streak of dawn, the girls wended their way back to their haunt on the fringe of the wood, and found their usual feast awaiting them, to which had been added several unknown delicacies, no doubt supplied by their new friend Puck.

They were too tired to talk much, and having satisfied their appetites, fell off to sleep.

The evening glow had mellowed the landscape before either awoke, but then, after a hurried "breakfast supper", as Mary called it, they hastened off to meet the Elf and his companions.

So anxious were they to be in time, that the dying beams of the sun still gilded the foliage long after the meeting-place was reached. They sat down therefore and discussed their prospects, with light hearts, to while away the minutes until their Fairy guide could present himself.

Night had fallen, and the girls had become a little anxious as to whether the Elf would keep his word, when there was a rustle among the grass, and Puck sprang into the open space before them, cap in hand.

"Greeting, and a merry night to you all," he said, bowing.

"How do you do," replied the girls, rising to their feet. "We thought you had forgotten us."

"Puck never forgets his friends—or enemies," said the boy gravely.

"Not only I, but others, come to welcome you. Wait." With that he put his hands to his mouth, uttering a soft musical cry. They listened a moment, then it was answered from a little distance. Again he made the signal, and again the reply

floated back; and while still wondering who the new-comers might be, the girls saw three Fairies break cover and come towards them.

With a cry of surprise they recognised them as Wildrose, Primrose and Mossrose.

Their first sensation was one of utter shame. The memory of their cruelty towards these gentle beings was so vivid that they stood with downcast eyes, unable to speak.

"Have you no greeting for me, Mary?" and Wildrose stole up to the shamefaced girl and threw her arms round her neck.

"I—I don't know what to say, I just hate myself," answered Mary in a low voice. "I behaved so badly to you."

"I have forgotten that—and so must you. I only think of those bright days when you so loved me. When I was kissed and fondled—sung to sleep with lullabies. Do you remember?"

"Yes, of course. But it's the other part I remember too," said the conscience-stricken child. "Oh! I am so sorry—you can't think. If I had only known," and her eyes filled with tears.

“There—there, I understand,” said the Fairy, kissing her. “Don’t cry. There is no need. We came to-night to bid you keep good cheer. See, here is Puck, impatient with delay. Eager to shew you all the wonders of our Fairyland. Trouble comes quick enough. Don’t meet it on the way.”

Mary glanced round and saw that Lucy and Kitty were smiling through their tears and, although still conscious of their misdeeds, were quickly becoming more at home with the Fairy dolls.

“When you have done with all this kissing and embracing,” cried Puck, stamping his foot, “we’ll get to work. You mortals have ill-used my sisters—that’s true enough, but they forgive you, and so there’s an end, Come! The moon is rising from her cloudy bed. The hour is here. Where shall we go, Wildrose?”

“Upon the lake below,” cried the Fairy.

“Or up into the topmost boughs, and swing as they go swaying in the breeze?” suggested Primrose.

“Or seek for larks’ nests, or wake the squirrel—he’ll give us sport enough,” exclaimed Mossrose.

“We’ll do all this before the break of day. But first the lake,” replied Puck; and without more ado they scampered off, Puck leading the way.

The path led deeper into the wood than the girls had ever been before; and soon they saw a glimmer of silver through the branches. Mary was about to ask Wildrose what caused it when a large expanse of water, now no longer hidden by the trees, came into view. The moon had touched it with her radiance, and countless ripples twinkled on its surface.

“There is the lake!” exclaimed Puck. “Can you not see its smiles of welcome and its beckonings?”

“It looks very pretty,” replied the prosaic Kitty, who was nearest him. “It’s like silver paper that toffee is wrapped in—all crinkly, you know.”

This remark was very properly received in cold silence, which remained unbroken until they had reached the edge of the lake

where the tiny wavelets rippled invitingly to their feet.

Once there, the Elf knelt down, his face almost touching the water, and uttered a strange, shrill cry which travelled across the lake and broke upon the opposite bank.

For a few moments nothing happened; but then there was a splash and commotion in the midst of some plants of water-lilies, a leaf of which, after having been shaken violently, floated towards them.

With great surprise, the girls watched its approach, and their astonishment became greater when the heads of several gold-fish came bobbing up expectantly.

"Now for the journey!" exclaimed Puck, jumping lightly on the broad leaf. "The steeds are eager, and we'll skim the water like the wind."

After a brief hesitation, the girls followed the Fairies on to this curious boat, while Puck stooped over the edge with three broad bands of silk in his hands, which the girls had noticed fastened by threads to the leaf. He slipped one of these over the head of each of the three gold-fish, as they

came, obedient to his call, and then gathering up the still finer threads which were also attached to the collars, he waved his wand of grass as a signal that all was ready.

As though eager to obey him, the scaly steeds sprang forward, and the girls found themselves being carried along at what seemed a breathless speed.

When they had become a little accustomed to this marvellous method of travelling, Mary turned to Wildrose, who had placed a protecting arm around her, and began to ask questions.

"What jolly sort of fish! Who taught them to behave like horses?" she asked.

"They are the subjects of the Queen," replied the Fairy, "and do her bidding."

"Then I suppose they know Puck?" said the puzzled girl.

"Know him! Every living thing in all this land knows Puck, and loves him too."

"Except spiders," observed Mary slyly.

"Spiders, adders, all malignant creatures are things apart," explained Wildrose sadly. "They are our foes, and love evil for evil's sake."

“But will fishes and birds and things like that, do what you ask them?” went on Mary eagerly. “And do they understand what you say to them?”

“Aye, and speak as well.”

“So they do!” exclaimed Mary. “Why, the grasshoppers told us to go back, I remember. But they don’t talk in England.”

“Oh yes, they do; but you are deaf to what they say,” said Wildrose, a little sadly. “Birds, flowers, insects, everything in nature has a tongue, but only Fairies hear and understand.”

“It must be nice to know so much,” observed Mary a little curiously, “and to have so many servants ready to do what you ask them.”

“It is free service, rendered for love’s sake,” cried the Fairy warmly. “We help the helpless, shield the weakly, aid all in suffering and pain; and so they pay us back whene’er they can.”

Mary was about to ask further questions when a dull roar of water made her glance anxiously ahead.

They were travelling straight towards an

outlet from the lake, where a thin line of foam proved plainly enough that the journey, if continued in that direction, would be far from smooth.

"Look where we are going, Wildrose. There is a waterfall or something there, and we shall be falling over it in a minute. Please tell Puck to stop," said Mary in a great state of alarm.

"'Tis not so fearful as you think," laughed the Fairy. "'Tis only for the sport of whirling down the falls that we are here."

"To float upon the lake is nought," cried Primrose. "Wait and you shall see how glorious it is to shoot the rapids; to feel the waters boil and toss beneath you, and see the rocks flash by as you go slipping down."

"But—but suppose we get upset," cried Kitty, very scared at the prospect, "we shall all be drowned."

"Nay, trust to Puck. He knows the stream by heart. There is no fear of that," said Mossrose, clasping Kitty tightly. "We'll see that no harm comes to you."

The other fairies having also grasped

their charges tightly, the feeling of dread which first seized them, gave place to a most delightful sense of expectancy, while the speed with which they were travelling, added to their excitement.

The broken water was very near now, and the tumult was so loud that they could scarcely hear their own voices. Each one held her breath as they dashed towards the brink. They heard Puck crying, "Bind each to each. Hold fast! nor loose your hold," and then the leaf dipped, and rushed upon its dangerous descent.

Breathless with suspense and filled with a fearful joy, the girls clung to their fairy protectors. The leaf swinging round in the current, was apparently helpless in the rush of waters, and yet some guiding hand helped the frail craft to escape a thousand dangers. Now a great stone would loom before them, threatening destruction; sometimes a sharp ledge of rock, over which the stream poured, would seem waiting to rend the leaf asunder; while again they would sweep through a narrow gorge, down which the stream rushed with terrifying swiftness to plunge madly

into the spume and spray and whirling eddies below. But from each ordeal Puck emerged triumphantly. He stood, his feet planted firmly, his little figure upright as a dart, the picture of resolute confidence. His long locks streamed behind him, from the rush of air, while his sparkling eyes and flushed face made him the prettiest, boldest charioteer that ever guided fish.

It seemed hours before the last green-slimed boulder was left behind and they once more moved evenly in the quickly flowing stream, although the time was but a few seconds.

With a look of exultation Puck turned laughingly to his convoy.

"Well, children, did any mortal ever steer a boat like that, or bring you safely down a cataract?"

"Never in all our lives," cried Mary, wild with excitement. "It was just splendid!"

"And did you have no fear?"

"No. Well—perhaps—only a little at first. It was so funny. I felt frightened and liked it."

"It was heaps better than a switchback



*The prettiest, boldest charioteer that ever
guided fish.*

railway," cried Lucy, "or tobogganning, either."

"Are there any more of them, Puck?" asked Kitty, still trembling a little. "I wasn't a bit afraid after Primrose caught hold of me."

"There is another, where the water breaks," said the Elf, pointing ahead with his disengaged hand. "'Tis steeper and more rapid than the first."

A chorus of "Oh's" followed this remark, while Puck turned round and took a tighter grip of the silken reins.

Once more the pace of their strange craft increased, drawn along by the gathering strength of the current, and again they plunged into the tumult and rush of the swift waters.

The peril seemed greater than before; the frowning rocks looked more jagged and the stream narrower and more turbulent. But again Puck steered his downward way unerringly, and they emerged breathless into the calmer waters beneath.

"There. Now we'll rest awhile," said the Elf as he guided his team towards the

right bank of the stream. "The fish are tired and the night grows old. We'll to the shore and seek fresh pleasures there."

As he spoke the leaf touched land, and having unharnessed the golden steeds, he called to the others to thank them.

The fish raised their heads eagerly as the Fairies called to them, and seemed to find great pleasure at the caresses they received. The girls too patted their cold, scaly backs, without the fish shewing any signs of fear, and it was not until Puck gave the word that they swam gaily away, leaving the leaf to follow at its leisure.

The three Fairies with Mary and Lucy threw themselves upon the ground, while the ever-restless Puck, followed by Kitty, began climbing the reeds that grew close by the bed of the stream.

"And what think you, sisters, of our Fairyland?" asked Wildrose, smiling.

"Oh! it's beautiful!" cried Mary, sighing in ecstasy. "And to think, a few days ago we didn't believe in Fairies or Fairyland, either. Everybody seems so happy here," she added with a half sigh.

"No lessons—no French verbs or Miss Harbutts," chimed in Lucy. "And you can do as you please and go where you like."

"And it's so lively," Mary again struck in. "Think of having dances and concerts—such dances and such concerts—nearly every evening. Why, it's splendid! Where did you all learn to dance so beautifully?" she asked.

"How can we help but dance. Glad hearts make tripping feet. Joy treads the lightest measure," was the smiling reply.

"But are Fairies always happy? Don't they ever have any trouble at all?" persisted Mary.

"Sometimes the shadows fall, and sorrow steals the brightness from our lives," answered Wildrose, a shade of melancholy crossing her face.

"But what sort of sorrow? You all seem so good and fond of each other."

"P'r'aps it's spiders and things?" suggested Lucy.

"Yes, sometimes that. It may be troubles that we have ourselves, and often troubles that befall our friends," added the Fairy,

gazing wistfully at the girls. "But come, we'll not speak of it. To-night we take our pleasure. Away with dismal thoughts! Look you at Puck and Kitty, their hearts are feather-light. See how they feel the glories of the night."

In truth the shrieks of delight that came from those two, proved that they, at least, were free from care. Puck had climbed up a long stem of grass, and having taken a firm hold of its seed-tuft, threw all his weight upon the end, and so bent it to the earth. Then, from a sudden push with his feet on the ground, the stem flew back to an upright position, bearing the Elf with it. This sport seemed so enticing that Kitty was following his lead, and the pair were swaying side by side, the child making frantic endeavours to bend her stem to the earth, while Puck was laughing at her efforts.

"Everything is so funny here," said Mary, at last resuming the conversation. "And there are such lots of things we can't understand, so we want you to tell us all about everything."

“And tell you now—at once?” said Wildrose, laughing at her eagerness.

“Oh! no. But everything we ask you. You told us about the dancing; but now we want to hear about the music. Do you know, Belin—I beg your pardon, Wildrose,” here she blushed a little, “that we have heard nearly all your music before, not that it ever sounded so beautiful—but we *have* heard it, haven’t we, Lucy?”

“Oh yes. I suppose Ophel—How stupid!—Primrose, that someone comes from Fairyland to Earth and brings back all the prettiest tunes.”

“Nay, it is not so,” explained Primrose, after she and Wildrose had exchanged smiling glances. “The music comes from us to you—not from you to us.”

“But how’s that?” asked Mary, bewildered. “I thought we were the first people who ever got into Fairyland.”

“Not so. Besides we Fairies visit Earth, and leave our melodies behind us.”

“How do you do that? You don’t write the tunes down, do you?” asked Lucy, anxious to quite understand.

“Not in the way you mean,” said Wildrose.” We visit those with Music in their hearts—those who love her well; and when they sleep, we come and sing the sweetest melodies into their ears; so when they wake, they write them down and give them to the world.”

“Then that is where all the tunes come from!” cried Lucy. “But where do Fairies find them?” she persisted.

“Everywhere!” exclaimed Primrose. “The bubbling of the brook, the hum of wings, the rustling leaves, the whispering grasses, each and all give out most perfect music.”

“But we have all that at home,” said Mary. “Why can’t we hear them make music too.”

“I cannot tell. Perhaps you are too big; perhaps you cannot listen as we do; perhaps these things sing only in our Fairyland.”

“Oh! how nice it would be if we could learn to hear,” said Mary wistfully. “Don’t you think we should if we stopped here long enough.”

“It might be so—if you stayed in your present shapes,” answered Wildrose, with a little sigh.



The Hum of Wings.

"And why not? Will the Queen send us home? What is going to happen to us?" cried Mary, roused to fear by something in the Fairy's tone.

"I do not know."

"But you know something. You can guess. I'm sure you can," and Mary clasped her arm almost roughly.

"Even Fairies cannot say what will be," replied Wildrose. "Why, you simple one, you're meeting trouble, though I warned you not," and she sprang to her feet as though anxious to escape from further questions. "Here's Puck all ready for a journey. Quick or he'll vanish."

Almost as she spoke, the Elf, tired of swinging on the pliant stem, had beckoned to Kitty, and the two were stealing away through the grass, with the intention of hiding from the rest.

Wildrose, however, followed quickly, and Puck and Kitty, after a desperate attempt to escape, were overtaken by the others.

The whole party then continued their journey in quest of new adventures.

CHAPTER VII.

A SCAMPER AMONG THE TREE TOPS.

BEFORE long the travellers left the wood and came to the foot of a hill. It was covered with smooth short turf, while at the summit grew a tree, with its boughs growing upward and close to the trunk. It was very tall, tapering almost to a point, and the wind was bending its slender head, and shaking its branches until they seemed struggling in its embrace.

"A glorious ride we'll have," shouted Puck, pointing upward to the swaying crest. "See how the breeze is frolicking up there. We'll mount at once."

"Oh for goodness!" cried Lucy, "you don't mean to say that you are going to climb up that tree?"

"Climb to the topmost twig," laughed the Elf, "and you shall lead the way."

"I'll do nothing of the kind," observed the girl in a most decided tone. "In the

first place I couldn't. And if I could, I wouldn't."

"Of course not. Why, we shall fall down and break all our bones," said Mary indignantly.

"I should be frightened to death," wailed Kitty. "Please don't make me go."

"Nay, there is no cause for fear. Why you could spring from any dizzy height and fall as light as leaves," explained Wildrose. "You will not be afraid if once you start."

"But—but we can't climb," explained Mary, still hanging back.

"Oh! yes. Remember you're not mortals now."

"Except that you're in mortal fear of falling down," cried Puck wrathfully. "I have no patience with such cowardice."

"We're not cowards!" exclaimed Lucy; "but of course we're not used to it."

"Well, used or not, you'll go or stay alone, just as it please you. I'm for the tree, and follow all who dare."

With this the Elf dashed to the trunk, and mounting with incredible swiftness, was soon lost to view among the lower branches.

Since the Fairies had promised to save them from mishaps and Puck had called them cowards, the girls felt that they could scarcely refuse to make the attempt, and so, with a good deal of trepidation, they ran to the foot of the tree.

Had they been of ordinary human size and weight, the mere idea of getting, even to the nearest bough, would have been ridiculous, but now they found the ascent quite easy.

Each little roughness in the bark afforded a firm hold for hands and feet; while encouraged by their Fairy guides they found themselves rising higher and higher with not much labour or difficulty.

Far away above them they could hear Puck singing lustily, his voice mingling with the whistle of the wind as it swept through the leaves. The girls' spirits rose as the sense of security grew stronger, and they became eager to reach the top. It seemed a very little while before the last projecting limb had been left below, and they forced their way through the close-growing twigs, to the very pinnacle, where each branch

had become so thin that they could clasp their arms round it with ease. The little party clung to the slim, yielding stem, like a cluster of butterflies, and gazed over the landscape.

For a time the breeze had dropped, so that, with the tree motionless, they could let their eyes wander over the wood to the stream stealing round it like a silver necklace, and to the level country beyond, which stretched away to the mysterious hills, looming shadowy in the distance.

"Isn't it lovely up here?" murmured Kitty. "And how bright the moon is. It's almost like daylight.—I wonder," she added, a little wistfully, "where home is? Do you know, Mossrose?" and she turned to her guardian Fairy. "You ought to, because you have been there."

"'Tis far away—beyond the hills," answered the Fairy.

"As far as that!" cried Lucy who had overheard the remark. "And how ever shall we get back?"

"As you came here, so shall you return," answered Primrose.

"But we don't even know how that was," replied Mary.

"You came as feathers on the wind; as sea-wrack washed up by the waves; as summer clouds," laughed Puck mockingly. "Ask nothing. You three mortals seek to know too much. Listen! Here comes the breeze! Cling fast, or else you fall."

As he spoke, they could hear far off a faint moaning, and see the trees beneath them move uneasily. Then, with a sudden rush, the wind swept down upon them, bending the slender tree-top like a whip, and tearing savagely at every twig and leaf. Again there was a brief lull when the stem flew back upright, only to be held again in the grip of the wind, and tossed and shaken this way and that until the girls shrieked in mingled terror and delight, and Puck yelled defiance at the blustering elements.

"Oh! Oh—h—h!" cried Kitty, clutching the stem in desperation, half laughing and half crying. "You're sure it won't break, Puck. Oh! Oh—h—h! wouldn't Freddy be frightened if he were up here."

"But he wouldn't have been up here. No one could have made him come," gasped Lucy.

"Isn't—it—lo—o—ove—ly!" came from Mary, as a sudden gust made the branches toss impatiently. "It's better than any swing I ever knew."

But as the wind increased and the boughs swayed and shivered before its rude assault, Fairies and mortals alike had enough to do to keep their footing without wasting their breath in conversation.

They clung on therefore, the breeze streaming their hair and reddening their cheeks; the wild excitement of so strange an adventure driving away all sense of fear.

Now, as the stem bent under the blast, they could look down, finding nothing but their frail hold to save them from falling into space. Then the wind would come in short puffs, and shake the branch angrily, as though trying to hurl them fathoms below; while sometimes, in kinder mood, it would sway them to and fro, soothingly humming a lullaby among the branches.

How long they remained at this dizzy

height, caressed and buffeted in turns, they could not tell; but it was with no great joy that they heard Puck saying it was time to descend.

"Oh! not yet, Puck," protested Mary. "It's so jolly up here. Let us all stop till morning."

But the Elf would have none of it, and so the party descended the tree, scrambling from branch to branch with astonishing ease and certainty.

They had reached the lowest bough, which was some twenty feet from the ground, but which looked very much more to the tiny mortals, when Puck paused.

"Which of you dare to leap from here?" he asked, looking round and laughing.

Nobody replied; the girls being aghast at such a suggestion.

"Come, I'll lead the way. Surely, Kitty, you are not afraid?"

"Yes, I am," was the prompt answer. "I wouldn't do it for anything," and the child caught her breath as she peered down.

"It is like jumping from a church steeple," added Lucy.

"You do not fall, you float," cried the boy impatiently. "Now, are you with me?" and he came close to Kitty as though to persuade her further. The child, however, drew back frightened; but with a sudden dash he caught her in his arms and, amid shrill cries of dismay from the girls, sprang into air.

"They will be killed!" shrieked Mary, clutching Wildrose, and hiding her face.

"Nay. They are safe enough. See."

Plucking up courage, the girl leant over, and saw the pair descend steadily, and drop quite lightly on the turf beneath.

"Oh! It's just splendid!" Kitty shouted up at them. "Exactly like floating. Do come! You won't hurt yourselves a bit. It is the best game I ever played."

Some urging from the Fairies, however, was required before the other girls prepared to make the desperate leap. But since Kitty had done so, they could scarcely refuse, and so with great misgivings they shut their eyes, held their breath and dropped from the branch.

They expected a sudden rush through

the air and a dreadful bump when they reached the ground; but in this they were mistaken, since the motion was gradual, and extremely pleasant. So light was their descent, that they scarcely knew when their feet touched the ground.

"Well, that is funny," remarked Lucy. "How was it we didn't come down thump?"

"It's because we are a kind of Fairies," said Mary promptly.

"The next time we climb a tree," chimed in Kitty, "I shall jump off from the top. I should like to be falling all day long."

"All night long you mean," corrected Lucy.

"Well, it's the same thing. Where are we going to now?" she asked Puck, as they hastened down the hill in the direction of the wood.

"I'm going to rouse the lazy squirrels from their beds," he answered.

"Why? What are they going to do?"

"You shall learn ere long. Haste! haste! or morn will come and end our frolic."

In spite of their water trip, their long walk and the climbing of the tree, the girls shewed no signs of fatigue, so that they

followed Puck gaily enough, chattering all the while to the Fairies who kept ever by their side.

Before long they had once more entered the gloomy portals of the wood, and skirting the undergrowth, the Elf trod a little used path which ended at the foot of an old oak tree, its bark grey with age. Great branches spread out on each side, throwing forth masses of foliage, through which the pale stars faintly twinkled.

"Another climb!" said Kitty gleefully. "Are we going to the top again?"

"Nay. Not so high as that," and Puck sprang to the trunk and mounted to the lower boughs. Now this time the mortals caused no delay, so that everyone was quickly among the branches in close attendance upon the leader.

Some half way up Puck paused before a great knot in the trunk, and putting his head through a hole which pierced its centre, uttered the cry with which he had previously called the fish.

They waited silently; but since no answer came, the cry was repeated.

This time it met with success, since a sleepy voice from the hollow of the tree replied, "Who calls?"

"'Tis I—Puck, you lazy ones. Come forth, I've need of you." After a brief pause, a reddish brown head peeped out, and a pair of bright eyes gazed round at the group.

"What would you at this hour? 'Tis early yet. You woke me from my dreams. I saw a pile of nuts as tall as yonder hill, and they were mine—all mine—a winter's store."

"'Tis time you woke from such a greedy dream," laughed the Elf. "Where are your brothers? Still asleep, I vow. Quick! call them. There is a journey you must go before the day."

Grunting his discontent, the squirrel disappeared, but in a few moments again emerged from his hiding-place, in company with three others, all yawning, and heavy with sleep. They soon, however, threw off their drowsiness, and curling their bushy tails over their backs in jaunty fashion, awaited Puck's demands.

The girls were becoming used to seeing

everything of gigantic dimensions, so that they were not surprised to find that squirrels were the size of horses.

The discovery, however, that they were to be used for riding purposes, was not only new, but somewhat startling, so they did not fall in with Puck's suggestion with much ardour.

"But we don't know how to ride," observed Mary. "We never rode anything but donkeys on the sands—and then we fell off," she added plaintively.

"And squirrels are such wriggly, jumpy things," said Lucy. "I'm sure we couldn't stop on their backs."

"With you three mortals it is always No! no! no!" exclaimed Puck in great anger. "You would not climb. Oh! no. And now you fear to mount a squirrel's back. I have no patience with such fears."

"Nay, 'tis only natural; they are but children yet," urged Wildrose. "Each fresh adventure is so strange to them. Come, Mary, you shall sit with me. Indeed there is no danger."

The other Fairies spoke in similar fashion, so that, their fright being somewhat allayed,

the girls scrambled on to the backs of these remarkable steeds.

Puck had mounted the first squirrel, who was to lead the way; next came Wildrose and Mary, nestled down in the soft coat of the animal, then Mossrose and Lucy, while Kitty and Primrose brought up the rear of the cavalcade.

Before starting, both Fairies and mortals took a grip of the long fur, and put their backs firmly against the tail which curled along the squirrel's back; then, having answered "Yes," to Puck's enquiry as to whether they were ready, the Elf gave his steed the word to start.

As the animals began to move along the branch in quick bounds and leaps, a chorus of shrieks arose from the children. The bumping they had experienced on the backs of donkeys was smoothness itself to the terrible jerks and thumps that fell to their share on so exciting a journey.

"Ple—le—le—ase—let me—g—get oh! oh! off," begged Mary, the words coming in pieces, as it were. "I can—ca—can't—hold—on much—long—lo—longer."

Similar wails of anguish came from the other girls, although Kitty, in spite of the extreme discomfort, was laughing loudly.

"D—d—don't laugh, Kitty," cried Lucy angrily. "It's—it's s—so sil—ly. I'm sure—there's no—no—thing—to laugh—at. Oh! If—they'd—on—ly sto—o—p."

Having once started, however, the squirrels plainly had no intention of pausing, even for a moment—at least, so long, Puck led the way on the foremost one. The Fairies who seemed perfectly at ease, encouraged their charges to bear their woes with fortitude, assuring them that before long they would become used to the peculiar motion and enjoy themselves mightily.

"I'm sure—I—sha'n't," gasped Mary. "I never—did like being—jogged about, and I nev—er shall."

Again, however, the Fairies' words proved true. The children were so light that they very quickly found themselves able to rise or fall as the occasion served, and that only a slight movement was necessary if made at the right time.

Now that Mary did not find it imperative

to shut her eyes, hold on with all her might and complain loudly, she began to look about and take some interest in the chase. It certainly did appear to be a very dangerous kind of game, and enough to make anybody quake; but for all that it was very thrilling.

Puck was urging his squirrel to its topmost speed, now standing upright on its back, holding on by the tail, and sometimes lying down, his head level with his steed's ears, to avoid some overhanging twig.

The leader's agility was wonderful, although not more so than that of his companions. They bounded along without a moment's pause; now scampering along a branch, which bent and cracked beneath their weight, until they reached its extremity, then leaping to another, quite heedless of the dreadful space between.

The girls found themselves in all sorts of positions. The Elf, out of pure mischief, travelled in most zig-zag fashion. At times the squirrels would climb a tree trunk, so that the riders were upright; then they would scramble down, placing everyone's heels a good deal higher than their heads. This

done, they would drop from branch to branch, amid shrill cries from the breathless mortals, or jump from right to left or left to right so suddenly that it was as much as the travellers could do to keep their hold. But as the wild ride progressed, the children entered more and more into the spirit of it. They even found themselves urging on their steeds to fresh endeavours. It was glorious to rush through the air at such breakneck speed, bounding along from tree to tree, springing hither and thither in mad haste, and they thrilled delightfully at the thought that a slip or a breaking bough would hurl them to the ground which seemed so far beneath them.

Indeed the jump from tree to tree was by far the best of the fun, and although they held their breaths as their active steeds gathered themselves together and leapt into space, it was always followed by a cry of ecstasy when they were safely across to the opposite branch.

It seemed as though they had raced all round the wood before Puck called a halt, at which signal the panting squirrels sat up

and wiped their heated brows with their paws.

"'Twas a brave ride and a speedy one," said the Elf, swinging his leg over the squirrel's back and dismounting. "You let no moss grow, while you dallied."

"We did our best, Puck," observed the leader modestly. "No squirrel can do more."

"Nay. Few can do as much," said Wild-rose approvingly. "We all do thank you very heartily."

"I am sure I do," broke in Kitty. "You are like donkeys, only ever so much better."

At this remark the squirrels bridled up, and one, in a sarcastic tone, remarked that he was very delighted to hear it.

"She doesn't mean anything rude," explained Mary. "But donkeys are the only things she ever rode on before to-night. I think it was more like flying than riding. Why, you might have had wings by the way we went."

This flattery brought a more amiable look on the faces of the squirrels, and they bowed graciously.

"And now as your reward," said Puck.

"I'll tell a secret. I know a store of nuts, well ripened, hard and dry."

"Where! where!" cried all the squirrels, pricking up their ears eagerly.

"Meet me here at sundown to-morrow, and I will guide you to the spot, I promise."

"We thank you, my lord Puck," said the leader. "We will attend, fear not."

"I have no doubt of that. And so good-night," replied the Elf laughing.

"Good-night to you, and good-night Fairies all," with which salutation, the squirrels scampered off to finish their interrupted sleep, while Puck and his companions dropped lightly to the ground.

"'Tis growing light. Dawn treads upon night's heels," he said, looking towards the east, where a faint glow trembled above the hills, "and so our frolic ends. How did you like the sport?" he asked, turning to Kitty, to whom he had taken a great liking. "Is it as pleasant as the revels on that dull earth of yours?"

"Oh! It's a thousand times better," cried the child, clapping her hands. "If all the good times I ever had at home were to

happen in one day, they wouldn't be half as jolly as this has been."

"Oh! we have enjoyed ourselves," broke in Mary. "I don't think, if I live to be a hundred, I shall ever forget it."

"And the things we have done!" exclaimed Lucy. "Sha'n't we have heaps to tell them when we get home—only I'm afraid they won't believe us," she added sadly.

"Fancy telling Freddy we had been for a ride on a water-lily leaf, with gold-fish to pull us along," said Mary, "why, he would say we had made it all up."

"And swung on the top of a high tree, and raced all round a wood on a squirrel's back."

"'Fibs!' that is what he would say," bewailed Kitty. "That is the worst of it."

"Never mind. We know we've done it, and that's the great thing," said Mary cheerfully. "And it is good of you, Puck, to give us such a splendid time," she went on, turning to the Elf. "And you too, Wildrose. You are a dear, that's what you are," and she hugged the Fairy to shew her gratitude.

Kitty was in so excited a state, that she embraced everybody, Puck included, while Lucy was content to express her thanks in a less demonstrative fashion.

"The day is breaking, so good morrow to you all," said Puck. "And rest assured, if 'tis within my power, we'll have more merry nights together."

"And we shall see you soon," said Wildrose, "if we can steal away. 'Tis true we break the Queen's commands in doing so, but that's a risk we run for love of you. Good-bye—and pleasant dreams, and sweet awakening."

The girls were so reluctant to part with their friends, even for the briefest time, that they clung to them, begging that they would come again the next night, and it was not until the Fairies had faithfully promised to try their utmost, that they were released. At last they vanished among the undergrowth, while the girls wended their way towards the tree under which they hoped to find the accustomed meal.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FAIRY PRISON.

THE wonderful adventures through which they had passed, made the three mortals mightily hungry, and it was with great satisfaction that they found, on arriving at their journey's end, a plentiful supply of seed and honey, and other dainties.

After a hearty meal, sleep began to weigh down their eyelids, and, too tired to talk over the exciting incidents of the moonlight frolic, they sank back and quickly lost themselves in slumber.

All through the hours of daylight they slept undisturbed, and it was long after the sun had set that Mary awoke and looked about her.

"Wake up, you two lazy things," she said, shaking her sisters to arouse them. "It is quite dark. Perhaps the Fairies and Puck are waiting for us in the wood. We shall be late."

The other girls sprang up hastily, and having bathed their hands and faces in a pool of dew which sparkled temptingly on the broad face of a dock leaf, they started out in the direction of the Fairy Ring, in the hope of meeting their companions of the previous night.

They were in the highest spirits, as the sense of strangeness and impending danger which had oppressed them when first they arrived in Fairyland, had quite disappeared.

Since Puck and the "three Roses", as they called them, were their friends, it was hardly likely that any of the other denizens in this delightful world would harm them. Already they had forgotten the few words let fall by Puck and the Queen and the Fairy dolls on their first meeting with the Fairies. And even had they remembered, their belief in Puck's influence among his fellows, would have prevented any fear of serious punishment. If those who had suffered at their hands, had forgiven them, the Queen would surely pardon them too; so that without any misgiving they boldly entered the wood.

The mortals had hardly passed the outlying trees, when suddenly they were surrounded by hundreds of grasshoppers, who sprang, apparently, from behind every leaf, each one carrying a lance of grass.

The girls started back more surprised than alarmed, and then Mary, with great civility, asked permission to pass. She had scarcely spoken before the ranks of guards opened, and a Fairy, one they had never before seen, stood before them.

He was a very dignified person indeed, with a severe cast of countenance. His costume was a scarlet robe, which fell from throat to heel, and he wore a curiously-shaped close-fitting cap of the same colour. In one hand he carried a white wand, while in the other was a scroll.

He stood for a moment, his stern glance travelling from one to the other of the girls, and then, slowly unfolded the written document, and spoke.

“Stand in the Queen’s name. Listen.” Here he paused again, and read the scroll.

“Whereas the three mortals known as

Mary, Lucy and Kitty are charged with grave misdemeanours against the Queen's lieges, and with other crimes, they are herewith summoned to appear before the Court of Her Majesty at moonrise to-morrow eve."

"If you please," said Kitty, "what are 'misdemeanours' and what is the meaning of 'lieges'?"

"I have read her Majesty's commands," the Fairy went on, evidently regarding Kitty's question as an impertinence. "And in her name I do arrest you. Guards, convey the prisoners to the spot whereof I told you, and see they do not stir thence. Away!"

The important Fairy disappeared, as mysteriously as he had come, while obedient to his wishes, the grasshoppers formed up on all sides of the girls, who once more started, under a strong escort, towards the centre of the wood.

This change in their prospects was so sudden that for some minutes the girls quite failed to realise their position. It was not long, however, before the fact

that they were prisoners, dawned upon them in all its unpleasantness. The strong force of grasshoppers hemming them in, was in itself proof enough, while the sharp cry of "Silence", which rang out whenever either of them attempted to find out whither they were being conducted, placed the matter beyond doubt.

Of this they were perfectly sure, that Puck knew nothing of the misfortune which had befallen them, and that when he did hear of it, no effort would be spared to set them at liberty. As the procession passed through the wood, therefore, the girls kept peering this way and that, hoping to catch a glimpse of their powerful friend; but in this they were disappointed, since the party halted at the foot of a dead oak, without having encountered either the Elf or the three Roses.

There was a small hole in the tree, extending a little above their heads, and wide enough for all three to walk in abreast. A curtain hung before it, heavier in texture and more sombre in hue than that which had draped the Queen's throne. This

was drawn aside by several of the guard, who bade them enter.

Once inside they looked about them, and found the interior of the trunk hidden by more curtains, which were stretched above them, forming a roof. In spite of the hangings the chamber struck damp and chilly, while the few fire-flies which clung motionless to the draped ceiling but feebly dispelled the gloom of the prison-house.

In one corner was a heap of dead leaves, evidently placed there as a resting-place for any unfortunate inmates, and upon these the girls threw themselves, wearily.

For some time they kept silence. Kitty nestled up closely to Mary as though for protection, while the elder girl put her arms round her, kissing her now and again, hoping to charm away her tears.

"What is going to happen?" whispered Lucy at last, breaking the silence.

"Oh! I don't suppose it will be anything very bad," answered Mary, making an attempt at cheerfulness.

"But suppose it is bad?" whimpered the youngest sister. "Suppose that song the

Elves sang the other night comes true? Suppose they leave us on a desert or—or tie us to a tree, or—or—put us under the ground in an ant's nest? Oh! Mary, you won't let them do it—will you—will you?" and she clung shudderingly to her sister, quite overcome with the bare idea.

"Of course I won't," said Mary stoutly. "It was only Puck teasing us. Besides, I'm sure the Queen wouldn't punish us like that. She looks much too kind."

"But I don't suppose they have taken us prisoners just for the fun of the thing," remarked Lucy. "That wretched Fairy who read out all those long words, didn't seem to see any joke in it."

"Well, perhaps it isn't quite a joke?" observed Mary. "I daresay we shall be brought up before the Queen; but when Puck and the Roses take our part she will just say we have been very naughty girls and that we are not to do it again. That's all."

"But if it isn't all?" sobbed Kitty, who was now thoroughly frightened. "Suppose the Queen says we are guilty, and must be

punished? How do the Fairies punish people?"

"Oh! well, anyhow, it won't be much. The Queen isn't disagreeable like Miss Harbutt," reasoned the eldest girl, determined not to look on the black side of things. "It is no good worrying. Let us talk about last night, and not think about anything else."

If Mary had been quite alone, she would have sat there and cried her eyes out; but as the eldest girl, it was so plainly her duty to cheer her sisters that, bravely stifling her feelings, she began to chatter about their moonlight revels with so cheerful an air that the other two almost forgot their present plight.

They had just entered upon an excited argument as to which particular squirrel could run the fastest, when they were interrupted by a great commotion outside the tree.

The grasshopper Guards were expostulating in loud voices and attempting to stop someone passing through their ranks. It was nevertheless plain that they were not succeeding, since the cries came nearer and and nearer. At last the girls recognised a

voice above the din. It was Puck coming to them.

"How dare you—insects!" he cried in scornful tones. "You will not let me pass? Me! Puck! Out of my path this instant."

"We have our orders, that none shall enter," answered the leader of the grasshoppers.

"Orders—from whom?"

"From the most learned Councillor Unbending."

"From Councillor Unbending!" was the contemptuous reply. "And do you think that I obey his learnedship? Do you think that he dare say, 'Puck shall do this or that. Puck shall go here or there'; or, if he did, that I'd submit to his presumption?"

"He represents the law," the grasshopper ventured to observe.

"And I the Queen; so stand aside, or you shall answer to her for this insult."

In another moment the curtain at the entrance was flung aside and Puck, flushed and wrathful, entered. Close behind him came a second Fairy, clothed in similar

fashion to the one who arrested the girls, except that both robe and cap were pure white, while his expression was so kind and full of sympathy that the children felt drawn towards him at once.

“Didst ever hear the like?” cried the Elf, turning sharply upon his companion. “I may not pass because your learned brother wills it so. I answer to the Queen for all my acts; but to none other. His insolence is past bearing.”

“No doubt the Guard mistook his meaning,” said the other soothingly. “He meant that none should come save those with business here.”

“It may be so, Councillor, but he shall hear of it before ’tis done with. And now, you mortals,” he went on, crossing to the girls, who had been listening to every word with great interest—“I hastened hither the instant news of your misfortune reached me. You did not doubt that I should come?”

“Oh no, Puck. We were perfectly sure you would,” replied Mary.

“That’s well. And here, with me, is Councillor Merciful, who’ll plead your cause before

the Queen. His tongue is silver and his heart is gold. Search Fairyland and yet you would not find so rare an advocate."

"We are very much obliged to both of you," was Mary's humble rejoinder.

"Of course you know the charges to be brought against you?" said the Councillor, speaking for the first time, in a voice like music.

"I suppose it's—it's about our dolls and throwing darts at them, and all that," responded Lucy dolefully.

"Yes. That and more. Each one is tried for all her evil works."

"All!" gasped Kitty.

"All."

"Oh for goodness! what a lot of evidence there will be," and Lucy groaned as her misdeeds crowded thick and fast upon her memory.

"So must you tell me all the good you've done. Then good and ill are balanced side by side and due punishment awarded."

"But who decides the punishment?" asked Mary anxiously.

"The Queen! whose anger is most high

against you," broke in Puck. "She loves her Roses—once your dolls, you know—almost as well as she loves me," and he drew himself up with a grand air of importance.

"Now tell me all the good you ever did," said Councillor Merciful softly. "Each little act of kindness; every helpful deed, or gentle word. Tell me, and the Queen shall hear of it."

The three girls looked at each other helplessly, but did not answer.

"Come! Come!" exclaimed Puck impatiently. "There is no time to lose."

"Can either of you recollect that we ever did anything good?" said Mary at last, in a hopeless tone.

"Well," answered Kitty, rubbing her nose with her forefinger, a habit of hers whenever she thought very hard—"sometimes we weren't so bad as at other times. But I suppose that doesn't count?"

"But surely, in all your lives, some little good you've done?" cried Puck amazed.

"Oh yes! Lots and heaps," said Mary eagerly. "But—but we have forgotten what it was."

Councillor and Elf exchanged blank looks, and for a time seemed quite at a loss what to suggest. At last, however, a happy idea occurred to the Elf.

"I have it, Councillor. This night I'll go to Earth, and bring back tidings of what these children did."

"To Earth! Oh! Puck, take us with you," begged Kitty, clutching him by the arm imploringly.

"Oh do!"

"Oh! please do, and we will love you ever so much," and the three gathered round, clamouring to bear him company.

"Nay, nay! I can't do that," he exclaimed. "But soon, perhaps, the Queen will let you go. Meanwhile keep courage in your hearts. I will be back before the trial is done, and it is strange indeed if such a mission brings us no success. Be brave and cheerful. Remember, I am your friend."

Even if the visit had no other result, it helped to raise the children's spirits. One staunch friend is sometimes more than a match for a hundred enemies; while since the Councillor spoke most

hopefully of their prospects before he departed, and promised to do his utmost to influence the Queen in their favour, they became more resigned to their prison quarters.

But even yet the sum of their visitors was not complete.

An hour or so before daylight a sound like a sigh floated down from the curtained roof. The girls listened.

"Mary! Mary!" came in a whisper.

"Who is there?" whispered back the girl.

"It is I—Wildrose. Are you three alone?"

"Yes, we are. Come down, there's a dear."

The awning was gently drawn aside, and the three Roses sprang down and stood beside the children, who flung themselves into the arms of the Fairies, sobbing and crying, piteously. It was quite impossible for them to explain how it was that they broke down so suddenly, and Mary felt called upon to apologise.

"I—I—can't—help it, Wildrose. We are so—mis—erable—you can't think. We are great babies—all of us, but we have—tried not to be—haven't we?"

"Ye—ye—yes, we have," sobbed the other two.

"Nay! Cry and cry again. For when the heart is full, it sometimes sheds its sorrow with its tears," murmured Wildrose, drawing the girl's head down on her shoulder, and stroking her hair tenderly. "Cry on, Mary, 'tis better that you should."

And so circled by protecting arms, the girls had a good, comfortable cry and felt very much better when they had quite finished.

"And now," said Wildrose, seating herself beside Mary on the heap of leaves, "tell me. Have you yet seen Puck?"

The girls quickly told her all that had happened, and the Fairy nodded her head approvingly.

"'Tis well he's gone. He learnt the news before it spread abroad. I did not know the Queen would act so soon."

"Then you knew that we should be put in prison, all the time?" said Mary.

"Oh! yes, 'twas known to all."

"And yet you never told us anything about it?" Mary went on reproachfully.

“Why should I do so?” argued the Fairy.
“It was your fate.”

“But couldn’t you have helped us to escape?”

“We have no power in this. The Queen alone can send you back to earth. And so we tried to make you happy while we could. If we had told you of this trial, ’twould have been cruel and not kind, serving no purpose but to make you sad.”

“Yes, of course. I’m stupid to blame you, Wildrose. And you are just darlings to come and cheer us up; and so are Puck and Councillor Merciful too. We don’t deserve it.”

“And if anything happens—anything dreadful I mean,” broke in Lucy, “we shall never forget how good you have all been to us.”

“Not as long as I live,” added Kitty with great emphasis.

“Puck says the Queen is dreadfully angry with us; but do you think she will punish us very much?” asked Mary anxiously.

“I cannot think so, when she learns the truth,” answered Wildrose. “She’ll relent, if Puck brings back good tidings.”

"But I don't see how he can," sighed Lucy, shaking her head dolefully. "I'm afraid we were fearfully bad girls—all of us."

"You see," Mary chimed in, "we wanted to be boys, and never tried to be young ladies. And then we hated lessons, simply hated them, and we didn't like Miss Harbutt one bit. And if she or mother told us to do anything, we wouldn't; but if they told us not to do anything, we went and did it at once. Didn't we?"

"We did," was the doleful response from her sisters.

"So you see, when the Queen hears all that, it will only make it worse."

"And yet perhaps, some tender, kindly act will prove your hearts are really good—as we are sure they are—and so outweigh the rest," said the Fairy cheerfully. "Of this you may be sure, that our sweet Queen will never punish when she can forgive. And so keep hope beside you; know too that staunch friends are close at hand to help you in your need."

"Yes, we know that, and so we don't feel so very miserable after all. But you

are not going?" she added hastily as the Fairies rose to their feet.

"Go, we must."

"Oh! please don't. As long as you're here, we don't feel a bit afraid," pleaded the girl.

"Nay. We run great risk in coming; yet greater still in staying. We part but for a little while," she continued, gently removing the clinging hands that tried to keep her. "So farewell. Be brave and hopeful."

Even as she spoke, Wildrose kissed the child two or three times, and then the Fairies sprang lightly upwards and disappeared in the same fashion as they had come, leaving the girls to their own anxious thoughts.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TRIAL. THE COMING OF PUCK.

It will hardly be supposed that the prisoners passed the rest of the night in much comfort, or that dawn, when it came at last, found them ready for sleep.

Nothing occurred to break the monotony, except the sudden entrance of several grasshoppers who placed food and drink before them, and departed as silently as they had come.

All through the day they sat thinking, thinking, thinking, of what would happen to them. Sometimes they talked of it, whispering to each other, but generally they were too dispirited and anxious to speak at all.

Kitty slept fitfully, dozing off, then waking up in a fright, to cry quietly, with her face buried in Mary's lap. Lucy nodded at times; while she also, frequently dissolved into tears. But Mary could not sleep at all.

She did her best to comfort her sisters, and to speak hopefully and bravely, but for the most part she sat with dry, wide-open eyes staring into the gloom, and thinking of many things.

It was all very kind of Puck and the three Roses to speak only of the bright side of things, and she was grateful. But if they were hiding the worst, and if, in spite of their efforts, the Queen decided to punish them, what then?

Since they had been in Fairyland Mary had scarcely thought of home. Now, however, she became dreadfully homesick. If only mother had been there! How she would have been hugged and kissed and cried over, and called the best and dearest "mammy" in all the world.

Even Miss Harbutt's presence would be more than welcome. In spite of her sternness the child was certain she would not allow anybody to punish them, not even the Queen. She fancied (and a wan little smile flitted across her face as the thought came to her) how astonished the Court would be if the governess, in her natural

size, were to stalk up to the Queen's throne, upsetting all the grasshoppers, with a sweep of her indignant skirts, and claim her charges. She could almost hear her say in her most severe tones, "These children, your Majesty, are my pupils. If there is any punishment to administer, I am quite capable of doing that myself," and walking back to Earth with them tucked away under her arm.

Even the angry tones of Jane, or Freddy's boisterous greeting would be far sweeter just now than all the Fairy music, and she strained her ears, half hoping that some such familiar sound would break this dreadful silence.

She listened in vain. The faint hum from the outside world floated in through the hangings, and the chirruping of the grasshoppers as they talked among themselves, were the only sounds that greeted her. So she sat hour after hour, sometimes kissing Kitty's wet cheeks and trying to make light of their misfortune, sometimes squeezing Lucy round the neck in sisterly sympathy, while her spirits sank lower and lower, as the dreary day dragged slowly along.

A ray of light had found its way in through an opening in the curtains. At first it seemed like a gleam of hope; but as it crawled gradually upwards, growing red as the sun dropped into its bed behind the hills, it seemed rather an omen of evil. Then it disappeared as though warning them that daylight was fading and the hour of trial was at hand.

The air grew chilly and the three children were glad to nestle down close to each other for warmth. Although their sad thoughts had driven away their appetites, it was somewhat of a relief when a few of the guard again entered and gave them another meal. By the time they had finished it, the hangings at the entrance of their prison were drawn aside, and the captain of the troop, a ferocious-looking grasshopper, with legs even longer than the rest, stood before the children.

“The Queen and Court await your presence. Follow!”

With a shiver of fright Kitty clung to her eldest sister, and Lucy shewed signs of bursting into tears; but Mary nerved

herself to face their accusers, and holding her sisters' hands, passed out of the prison.

A hundred or more grasshoppers formed round them instantly, and at the word of command they started off through the wood, in the direction of the twinkling lights, which shone through the trees, quickly conducting their prisoners into the centre of the open glade, immediately opposite the throne of the Fairy Queen.

The latter was in deep conversation with the two Councillors, so that the girls had a little time to look around them.

The night was cloudy and moonless, but the fire-flies and glow-worms lit up every detail of the scene.

Hundreds and hundreds of Fairies formed a deep ring, the front ranks lying, while those behind stood up.

On the two previous occasions when the girls had visited the spot, there had been music and dancing and laughter, while groups of bright-robed people had been wandering hither and thither, or flitting, like gaily-coloured moths, among the trees.

But now each subject of the Queen was

motionless, talking only in whispers, and looking at the prisoners—sometimes with sympathy and sometimes with reproach. All mirth and gaiety had taken wings, and a great sadness, a hushed dread seemed to have fallen upon the expectant multitude.

The girls easily discovered the three Roses, who had drawn as close to them as the guards would allow, and were smiling encouragement, although their eyes were full of tears. Puck, however, was not present, although some dozen or more elves, clad in scarlet tunics, were grouped round the foot of the throne.

In a few moments the two pleaders left the Queen's side; Councillor Unbending taking up a position about midway between the prisoners and their judge, while Councillor Merciful joined the children, and told them that the trial was about to begin.

A remarkably tall Fairy cried, "Silence in Court! Silence!" in a very loud voice, although as nobody was making the slightest noise, this remark struck Mary as quite uncalled for; and then the Queen

turned to Councillor Unbending, and spoke in her silvery voice.

“For what purpose have we met?”

The Councillor slowly unfolded a scroll, and then, in a pompous tone, replied to the question.

“May it please your Majesty to try three mortals known as Mary, Lucy and Kitty, for grave misdemeanours against your Majesty’s lieges, and for other crimes?”

“I beg you read the charges against these prisoners.”

“The charges, your Majesty, are too numerous to set forth here in detail. Briefly, they are as follow. Wilful and persistent disobedience to parents and guardians; laziness and ingratitude; and lastly, acts of gross cruelty to Wildrose, Primrose and Mossrose, known on Earth as Belinda, Juliana and Ophelia.”

“Prisoners,” cried the Queen, turning towards the children, “you have heard these dire offences with which our brother, in set terms, has charged you. What is your plea, ‘Guilty’ or ‘Not guilty’?”

After a moment’s consultation with the

Councillor, Mary stepped forward impulsively.

"If you please, your Majesty, we plead 'Guilty'; but—but we didn't mean it."

"Doth such a plea hold good?" asked the Queen of Councillor Unbending.

"Not so, your Majesty. 'Tis neither this nor that."

"Then let the trial proceed."

"'Tis plain that since these mortals have confessed their guilt," the prosecuting counsel continued, looking very important, and fierce, "we need no witnesses to prove the blackness of their crimes. They're girls, your Majesty, with every wish fulfilled; the fondest parents children ever had; a governess who loves them dearly—"

"She doesn't," interrupted Mary hotly. "She doesn't love us a bit. She hates us."

"Her love was there for all their wickedness," the Councillor continued in cold, even tones. "Toys, dolls, fine dresses—all were theirs. A spacious house—indeed all things desired by Earth-folk came to them. Yet were they steadfast in evil, shunning good. I dare them to deny it," and here the

speaker pointed a threatening hand at the prisoners.

“Oh! of course we do. We weren’t as bad as that,” cried Mary defiantly.

“Yet will I prove them worse! They took great pleasure in ill deeds; heedless that each wrong done did cost their mother many bitter tears—”

“But we didn’t know we ever made her cry,” broke in Mary again, regarding this accusation as most unfair. “We wouldn’t make mother miserable for anything. Would we?” and she turned to her sisters for support.

“Of course we wouldn’t,” said the other two, with sobs of indignation.

“They might have known it,” the Councillor continued, in sterner tones—“had they thought of any save themselves. But worse remains behind. ’Tis known how Wildrose and her sisters went, as dolls, to bring new happiness into these children’s lives. Now—mark their welcome.” Here the speaker paused and fixed his eyes upon the girls, who at the first mention of Wildrose, bent their heads in shame. “At first ’twas well; but soon neglect crept in, and

then came cruelty. Helpless and maimed the dolls were flung aside, uncared for and forgotten, a prey to moth and mouse; and when remembered, our sweet sisters had to bear fresh tortures. I beg your Majesty to listen well." And his voice grew shrill with anger. "These mortals set them up as targets, pierced them with darts, flung them to earth in brutal glee and would have burnt them had the means been there. Now where is their denial to these deeds?" and again with outstretched hand and gleaming eyes he turned to the girls, who dared not meet the accusing faces around them.

"It isn't fair to say that. Because we didn't know they could feel," said Mary at last, in a trembling voice, when the groan of horror from the spectators had died away.

"A useless plea," was the contemptuous response. "I pray your Majesty to bear in mind that they have pleaded guilty to these most barbarous acts, so do I leave them in your hands. But this I must say: Mercy would be ill-placed. Let stern justice fall, and every Earth child know our Fairy laws

do hunt down cruelty with swift punishment. I beg you give these monsters their deserts, and so warn others from their evil ways."

This speech was followed by a murmur of approval.

The fame of the three misused Fairies was spread throughout Fairyland. Their gentleness, their sweetness and their beauty had won all hearts, so that their sufferings at the hands of the prisoners aroused great indignation. Councillor Merciful was quick to notice the mood of the assembled throng, and looked round anxiously for some signs of Puck, who was the only hope on which the children could rely.

It was quite impossible to deny the facts, and unless there was some further evidence to shew the girls had moods of kindness as well as cruelty, the worst was likely to happen.

The three Roses also knew the importance of Puck's help, and were glancing this way and that, whispering together, greatly disturbed by his continued absence.

The hum of voices ceased at the cry of "Silence in Court" from the Usher, and again the Queen spoke.

“Councillor Merciful, what evidence have you in favour of the prisoners?”

“I call on Wildrose,” he answered confidently, looking towards the Fairy, who stepped forward and knelt before the throne.

There arose a murmur of surprise, when one of the victims appeared as a witness on behalf of the mortals. It died away, however, and Wildrose began, with tears in her voice,

“I beg you let me speak for these unhappy girls.”

“Can you deny the acts set forth but now?” cried Councillor Unbending in a loud tone.

“Alas! I cannot.”

“Then of what use to speak at all?”

“Nay, in all fairness listen to her words,” replied the other pleader.

The Queen nodded, and Wildrose continued:

“They once were kind to us. Indeed I think they loved us. Much care they gave and much tenderness. I beg your Majesty to let that plead for them.”

“And when was all this love bestowed?” asked the Councillor Unbending.

"When first we came to them."

"And when your pretty faces paled with time, and when your clothes were soiled and torn with wear, they cast you off. Speak! was that so?"

Wildrose hung her head, unable to give a denial.

"This, your Majesty, doth speak against, not for, the prisoners. It was as though they took a butterfly, and having brushed the bright bloom from his velvet wings, they killed him for his ugliness. Our sister's tender heart doth blind her to the truth. I pray you, brother, have you no better evidence than this?" he asked scornfully.

"I call on Puck. He hath a weighty word to speak."

Everyone looked this way and that for the Queen's favourite.

"Puck! Puck!" cried the Usher, and the word went echoing down the glades of the forest, followed by silence.

Again the cry rang out, and a third time; but only the far off hoot of the owl, as though in mockery, answered.

"The call is loud enough and yet Puck



When first we came to them.

comes not," said Councillor Unbending, with a grim smile.

"He is away on business of importance; but promised to return before the trial was begun. I pray your Majesty to stay awhile. He will be back before the night has passed," begged Councillor Merciful.

"That cannot be," replied the other pleader quickly. "Your Majesty doth know full well, it is against the law. He had due notice, yet he is not here."

"But is it not justice that we tarry? It would be sad indeed if we should wrong these mortals," said the Queen appealingly.

"Yet still more wrong if we do break the law. I do maintain the trial should proceed," was the stern reply.

Neither Queen nor Councillor could deny that this statement, according to a Fairy edict, was correct, so that, with a sigh, the former yielded to the demand.

"Then must we keep within the law. What other evidence have you in favour of these mortals?"

"Alas! your Majesty—none," was the sad reply.

"No witnesses to prove that they have done some good in their short lives?" she pleaded.

"I would I had."

"You know our laws. Good deeds are weighed against those of evil, and, as the scale falls on this or that side, so is the punishment awarded. The weight of evil here is very great, and if no kindly acts can speak for them their fate is hard indeed."

It was a dreadful blow to the girls to find their champion Puck had deserted them. Wildrose had done her best and failed, and it was plain that the Queen, although anxious to punish them as little as possible, was also powerless.

Mary struggled hard to keep calm; but Lucy was crying, while poor little Kitty clung to her skirt and sobbed quite audibly.

Councillor Merciful, with a grave, sad face, drew nearer to the throne, and again pleaded their cause.

"All I can plead, your Majesty, is youth and ignorance. They're very young and very thoughtless; but oftentimes a wilful heart is softened more by forgiveness than

by punishment; and we should pause lest what we call justice is, in truth, revenge. They're guilty, yes; but' not so guilty as my brother thinks, and I would beg your Majesty to look on these unhappy mortals, with some tenderness. They are so young, so lonely and so helpless. I pray you do not nip them with the frost of your displeasure, lest you may kill a gracious flower in the bud. Mercy! your Majesty, I crave for mercy!"

The sweet imploring tones of the speaker and the sight of the three prisoners, now overcome with grief, moved, not only the Queen herself, but the assembled Fairies, to a sense of compassion, while the free forgiveness accorded them by their victims also helped to turn the tide of feeling in their favour.

"Both Councillors have spoken," said the Queen, with a little break in her voice. "Hath any prisoner aught to say?"

"Yes, please, your Majesty," cried Mary, stepping forward, and raising her tear-stained face—"I'd like to say something. First of all that horrid Fairy there, says

what isn't true," and she pointed to Councillor Unbending, who stood grim and motionless.

"He makes us out awful creatures—worse than boys; but—but we are not. We didn't know we made mother unhappy, or we shouldn't have been so naughty; because we just worship mother. Don't we?" and she turned to her sisters.

"Yes, we do," they sobbed fervently.

"And how could we tell Miss Harbutt cared for us? She never shewed it. Did she?"

"No, she didn't," echoed the others.

"And how could we tell our dolls were Fairies. I'm sure, if we'd known what darlings they were, we wouldn't have hurt them for anything. They only seemed sawdust to us, and people aren't generally punished for throwing sawdust about. So that if we're put in prison, it's—it's a great shame."

Mary concluded with a burst of weeping, which she suppressed with difficulty as the Queen answered—

"The laws which you have broken do provide the punishment; not I."

"Then if that is so, your Majesty, I—I

want to ask you a great favour," Mary continued breathlessly. "Mother only has the three of us and Freddy—but he's a boy and doesn't count—so that if you keep us all here it will just make her frightfully unhappy, and I can't bear to think of it. So I want you to send Lucy and Kitty home and let me be punished. You see I'm the eldest, and whenever we got into scrapes—'scrapes', your Majesty, is what Freddy calls them," she added apologetically—"it was generally my fault, and so if you will only keep me it would be quite fair."

This act of self-sacrifice on Mary's part was received by the assemblage with a murmur of approbation, which became more audible when Lucy sank to her knees beside her sister and joined in the plea.

"Or if you won't do that, your Majesty," she sobbed, "send Kitty back to mother. She *must* have one of us. Besides, I'm quite as bad as Mary, and Kitty isn't."

"Your speech is generous," replied the Queen, with great sadness. "And were it in my power I would consent. And yet it cannot be. The law must be obeyed."

"Then it's a horrid, wicked law!" Mary cried, half mad with rage and fear, and desperation. "You will punish mother, who hasn't done anything, ten times as much as us."

"Hush! hush!" said the Queen, with a ring of authority in her voice. "Your outcry will not change the law. And now that all is said," she added, with great dignity, "I cannot find these mortals aught but guilty. They have confessed indeed, and since the ill so far outweighs the good, I can but pass the sentence which our laws provide. I beg you, Councillor Unbending, what saith the law?"

As the pleader slowly unfolded a scroll, which, until this moment, had lain beside him, a solemn hush fell upon the throng.

Afar off the wind moaned among the trees, as though speaking the mournful news of the children's fate, while the owl still uttered its mocking cry. But for this there reigned an intense silence, unbroken until the voice of Councillor Unbending rang out harshly.

"The sentence, your Majesty, is very

terrible; but not more so than the crimes themselves. It runs as follows." And very slowly and with much solemnity he read their fate:

"Never more their eyes shall rest,
On river bank, or mountain crest;
Never more, by sea or stream,
Watch the waters flash or gleam;
Nor mark the bee in sunny hours,
Pluck honey from the hearts of flowers
Nor the sweet moon lend kindly aid,
To pierce the gloom of forest glade."

Here he turned to the prisoners, and with his gleaming eyes fixed on their bowed figures, he continued:

"But, for their crimes, our Fairy Queen
Shall change them into things unclean.
Adders or toads, or such that shun
The light of day, the warmth of sun;
That creep and crawl—with deadly sting
And hate for every living thing.
Unloved, uncared for and—alone,
Until their span of life be done."

There was a cry of horror from the listeners as he concluded. Mary threw herself at the Queen's feet, imploring mercy; her pitiful appeal being echoed by many of the Fairies.

"It is, in truth, a dreadful sentence," exclaimed the judge, her eyes wet with tears, while sobs almost choked her utterance. "Is there no loophole for escape?"

"None, your Majesty," replied Councillor Unbending, "without fresh evidence to make their guilt less grievous."

"Think! think! ye mortals," pleaded the Queen. "I'm very loath to punish you so hardly. And if good deeds you've done, however small, they still may help to mitigate the penalty."

"We—we—can't," wailed Mary. "We are very bad girls and we can't think of anything."

For a few moments all was still, except for the sobs which rose pitifully on all sides. The Queen looked round with wistful gaze, as though seeking for means to succour the wretched prisoners, and then, with an air of great sadness, she rose, wand in hand.

"Now must I exercise the magic power, whereby ill deeds are punished." Here her voice broke; but nerving herself to the task, she continued, speaking each word with difficulty.

“This, Oh most unhappy mortals, is your doom!

“Never more your eyes shall rest,
On river bank or mountain crest
Never more by sea or stream
Watch the waters flash and gleam
Nor mark the bee in . . .”

Before she could proceed further, a voice from the outer fringe of the crowd, rang out piercingly.

“Puck! Puck comes!”

“Silence! Silence in Court!” cried the Usher in stentorian tones.

But heedless of the warning, all eyes were turned towards the spot whence the voice proceeded, while on all sides the cry arose—“Puck comes! Puck comes!”

With a new-born gleam of hope, the girls sprang up, trembling, while Councillor Merciful hastened to their side. The shouts swelled and swelled; and then amid a roar of welcome, they saw Puck push his way through the throng, and fall exhausted and breathless at the very steps of the throne.

CHAPTER X.

THE QUEEN PASSES SENTENCE.

HEEDLESS of court etiquette, many of the Fairies ran to the side of the fallen Elf, and raised him from the ground. For some seconds he lay gasping and unable to speak; but when breath returned he waved them impatiently aside, and knelt before the Queen, who had been watching him with much solicitude.

"Am I too late? Oh! say I'm not too late!" he cried beseechingly.

"Nay, there is yet time, although you tarried long upon your journey," said the Queen.

"Tarried! Indeed, your Majesty, you wrong me," was Puck's reproachful answer. "I've been to Earth and back, swift as a flash of light, with neither rest nor pause; and I have learned much news of these three mortals."

"I pray good news?"



I've been to Earth and back.

As the Queen asked the question, every one in the vast assemblage leaned forward eagerly, greedy to hear every word which should fall from the lips of the messenger.

"We are deceived in them. Their hearts are much more tender than we thought, and here is evidence to vouch for it."

The clear tones in which he spoke reached all parts of the ring, and a glad cry arose, which the Usher, very red and indignant, vainly tried to hush.

Councillor Merciful advanced to the boy and took from him a scroll, at the same time embracing him heartily.

"'Tis well done, Puck. Now may we save them yet," he said, glancing eagerly at the paper.

"And you yourself can speak on their behalf," continued the Queen.

"That will I, and most gladly!" exclaimed the Elf, who had now recovered both his breath and his jauntiness of manner. "But two days gone, a monstrous spider held me in his claws, catching me unawares. It would have gone hardly with me but that my cries for help brought these three mortals

on the scene. With sticks and shouts they then so valiantly assailed the villain, that he fled howling with pain and terror. I do protest so brave a deed hath saved my life, so do I owe them more than I can pay."

"'Twas brave in truth!" exclaimed the Queen, throwing grateful glances at the girls, "Speaking most loudly in their favour."

"And here, your Majesty, are many things to speak for them," broke in Councillor Merciful, who by this time had perused the scroll; "I pray your leave to here recite them."

The Queen bowed assent, and the pleader continued,

"First it is here set forth that, spite their faults, all people love them. This proves some goodness dwells within their hearts."

"That may be so. But is that goodness shewn by deeds?"

"It is in truth. The eldest prisoner, Mary, came one day upon a poor lame dog, who, being chased by boys, sought dumbly her protection. She took him in her arms, and through a shower of stones, carried him home and nursed him back to health."

"A very kindly act. You did this Mary?" she asked, bending graciously towards the girl.

"Oh! yes, your Majesty," said Mary, blushing a little. "It was poor old 'Cinders'. We kept him, you know."

"Why did you fail to speak of it?"

"I didn't know it—it was anything particular," stammered the girl. "Anybody would do a thing like that."

"Alas! I would it were so with you people of the Earth," answered the Queen, shaking her head. "And now what next?" and she turned again to the Councillor.

"Lucy, the second sister," he read, "once found a woman and her babe, half starved and clothed in rags. What little money she possessed, she gave most readily, and wept because it was so small a sum."

"A very tender heart," cried the Queen. "Why did you do this, Lucy?"

"I almost forget now," said the girl in a low tone. "But—but they looked so cold and hungry, no one could have helped giving them something."

"If every mortal thought as you, your

World would be a happier place," answered the Queen sadly. "But what of Kitty?"

"A year ago," continued the Councillor, "her brother lying ill, she spent long summer hours beside his bed, soothing his pain and weariness by reading tales aloud, so helping him forget his sufferings."

"It was most sisterly. Why did you thus shun the sunshine and the flowers on his behalf?" asked her judge kindly. Kitty hardly knew how to answer, but after a moment's thought she said in a hesitating manner:

"Well, you see, your Majesty, he is my brother and I'm very fond of him, and I'm certain he will do the same for me if I am ever ill in bed instead of him."

"I trust he would," replied the Queen, although she seemed to regard such an act on Freddy's part as a little doubtful.

"What else is there to balance their misdeeds?" and she again turned to Councillor Merciful.

"This is the record of their lives," he replied, holding up the scroll, "wherein I find that good deeds spring up here and

there like poppies in the corn. None can deny that they are naughty girls," and he gravely shook his head—"ungentle often, but only cruel unconsciously."

"Their cruelty is proved, so let the sentence stand," broke in Councillor Unbending, his voice harsh and angry with disappointment.

"I do protest against my learned brother's words. They savour much of malice and of spite!" exclaimed the other pleader, just anger shining in his eyes. "I pray your Majesty to pause. If this dread penalty's enforced, the good in them is killed, but not the ill; so we defeat our ends. I ask for justice, nothing more; a lighter sentence that shall cure, not kill, whereby these mortals, when again on Earth, shall tell how Fairy laws are merciful yet just."

Great applause followed the Councillor's last appeal, while the moment the Queen rose, it was plain that she, too, was disinclined to heed the harsh demand of the scarlet-robed pleader.

"Your words are good," she began. "I will be just, yet merciful. Listen, ye mortals.

Because of your good acts, I'll not pronounce the sentence lately read; but since your faults cannot be overlooked, your punishment is this."

She paused a moment as if in thought, and then spoke with grave deliberation, "Until three moons have passed ye shall remain with us, not in your present shape, but changed to dolls, in form and face alike to those three Fairies whom ye so ill used; and, as they once were yours, so now shall you be theirs."

At this point a cry of assent arose from all sides and every Fairy proclaimed the justice of the sentence. "Come, Fairies, gather round and help to weave the magic spell."

Directly the Queen had spoken, Councillor Unbending rolled up his scroll, and after scowling at the prisoners, shouldered his way through the excited crowd and disappeared in to the gloom of the wood.

The three Roses, with tears of relief in their eyes, rushed up to the girls and embraced them tenderly, begging them to fear nothing.

"But I don't quite understand," said Mary, still dazed by the sudden change in their fortunes, and uncertain as to the extent of punishment. "Shall we be exactly like you?"

"So said the Queen," answered Wildrose.

"But what about my being without a leg?" gasped the child.

"And what will become of my arm?" wailed Lucy.

"And—and—will my face be all melted flat?" sobbed Kitty.

"Nay, nay. You will be just as fresh and beautiful as we were—at the first," explained Primrose. "And so indeed you shall remain. We'll guard you with our lives."

"You will—won't you? Promise!" cried Mary hugging them each in turn. "And then I shan't mind being a doll a bit."

"Neither shall I. Only I hope it doesn't hurt much to be turned into one," asked Kitty anxiously.

At this point, a warning cry from the Usher of the Court made everyone fall back from the side of the children, and an escort of grasshoppers led them to the steps of the throne.

The Queen rose from her seat and bade them kneel before her. Then she beckoned to the musicians, who had hitherto been concealed from view, and they came forward and ranged themselves on each side of the dais.

Following them, came a company of Elves, who placed before the girls a large, cone-shaped object, bound in plaited grass. They then formed themselves in a semi-circle; while a band of Fairies joined hands behind them.

All this was done in perfect silence, and the proceedings were so uncanny that the children began to tremble a little with fright.

"Be brave! Fear nothing. We are with you always," came a whisper from behind them, and glancing round they found the three Roses standing serene and watchful. The sight of their friends, reassured them, and they were able to await the ordeal with greater calmness.

Directly Wildrose had spoken, a long plaintive note broke the stillness, and as though in answer, there commenced a melody, very slow and very sad. At the same time

the girls noticed a thin line of blue vapour issue from the cone, which floated upward, and then spread out in the shape of a fan. Soon it formed a misty veil, behind which the Queen and the Fairies, now slowly waving their wands to the rhythm of the music, looked afar off and shadowy.

When the curtain of vapour had fallen, the Fairies began a chaunt, swaying their bodies to and fro as they sang—

“Now the Magic spell we weave,
Mortals, learn our power;
See! our Queen her will doth breathe,
Mortals, learn our power.
Thus do we stamp out the seed
Of hate and cruelty and greed,
And punish every evil deed,
Mortals, learn our power.”

While this was being sung, the children felt a most remarkable change coming over them. They were getting smaller and their hands and feet became quite limp and without feeling.

Then the music swelled out louder. It became less sad, and there seemed a note of triumph in the voices, and of cheer and

comfort, so that the girls listened almost with pleasure.

“Now doth work the Magic spell,
Mortals, learn our power.
Yet fear not, for all is well,
Mortals, learn our power.
Though to-night this spell we cast,
Soon the ordeal will be past.
Ye shall home return at last,
Mortals, learn our power.”

The chaunt seemed to die away gradually; the blue mist became darker and darker until Queen and Fairies were lost to view, and there was not a sound from out the blackness which surrounded them.

Mary tried to rise; but every limb had lost the power of movement. She could think; but speech and hearing and touch and sight were lost to her.

“Of course,” she thought to herself. “I’m a doll now. A sawdust doll with a wax face. No wonder I can’t get up, or see, or anything like that. It’s very horrid, but it won’t last very long, that is one comfort. I wish I could see Lucy and Kitty. I expect they look very funny, and I shall laugh at

them. But of course I mustn't, or the wax will crack and I shall get ugly at once."

Just as this crossed her mind, she felt a pain in her leg. It wasn't very bad, being more like "pins and needles" than anything else; but how it was that she could feel anything at all, when she was only sawdust, puzzled her dreadfully. It grew worse and worse. She would have given anything to have rubbed the place; but, of course, that was out of the question. If she could only cry out, Wildrose might come to her assistance. But then she remembered that dolls couldn't cry out, except the ones that said, in a very silly way, "Pop—pa", "Mom—ma", when a string was pulled, and the Fairy dolls had not been made like that.

The pain grew so bad, however, that she felt obliged to try, and to her great astonishment, she said "Oh!" quite loudly.

And then her eyes opened—*and she was awake!*

CHAPTER XI.

HOME!

FOR a few moments Mary sat rigid with astonishment.

The wood, the Fairies, the Elves, everything had disappeared, and she was once more sitting in the schoolroom at home. She looked down at her skirt, and found she was no longer clothed in beautiful gauzy robes; but in her shabby and ink-stained morning frock. It was, as she afterwards regretfully observed, as though she were Cinderella after the clock had struck.

The girl reached down to rub her leg, and found it was the pressure of Kitty's head which was causing "pins and needles."

She waited, perfectly still, until her scattered senses sorted themselves into something like order; and then, quite suddenly, the delightful thought that, after all, none of them had been turned into dolls, made

her spring joyously from her seat, letting her youngest sister roll flat on the floor.

"Kitty! Kitty!" she cried, shaking the child who, in spite of this treatment, was only now half awake. "Wake up! Wake up! We are not dolls any longer."

"I hope it doesn't hurt to be turned into a doll," murmured Kitty drowsily. "Oh! I hope it doesn't."

With a little laugh, Mary dashed at Lucy, who was still fast asleep, her head on her arms.

"Wake up, Lucy!" she cried. "It's all right. We are home again with mother and Freddy and everybody. Make haste!"

"Oh! O-o-o-h! Don't make me a toad. I should hate to be a toad!" wailed the second girl, still slumbering uneasily.

"Nonsense! You are a girl again, back in the nursery," and Mary continued shaking her until she sat bolt upright and looked about, too surprised for words.

"So I am!" she said at last. "And so are you and so is Kitty! We're not dolls or toads either. Well, this is wonderful!"

By this time Kitty had scrambled to her

feet, and was holding Mary by the arm as though she had not yet quite realised where they were. Indeed everything that had lately happened was so real and vivid in their minds that they scarcely knew what to think; but stood looking at each other with puzzled faces.

"Have you two—been—been—dreaming?" asked Mary after a pause.

The others nodded vigorously.

"Anything about—Fairyländ?"

"Everything about Fairyländ," said Lucy in reply.

"Was the Queen of Fairyländ in it, and Puck and the three Roses?" she continued.

"Yes! Yes!" was the quick response.

"And were you—tried—for being naughty?"

"Yes, we were, and we were turned into dolls," said Lucy in a breathless whisper.

"All limp and sawdusty," added Kitty to complete the picture.

"So was I, except having 'pins and needles' in one leg. It's—it's—all very remarkable," added Mary solemnly. "I suppose we *must* have dreamt it?"

"Of course. At least, I suppose so. But isn't it funny that we should have all dreamt the same thing?" observed Lucy, her voice trembling a little.

"Perhaps we didn't," said Kitty. "Were you in a beautiful wood, living on honey and dew?"

"Yes. And I wore the prettiest dress," exclaimed Lucy.

"So did I," cried Kitty.

"And so did I. Shouldn't I like that frock to go to parties in," said Mary wistfully.

In this fashion each compared her adventures with those of her sisters, and when it became plain that each one's dream was the same in every particular, the trio gazed at each other with the most bewildered expression on their faces.

"It is strange that we should have all dreamt exactly alike," observed Kitty in a half whisper. "It seems almost—as if—as if it somehow happened. Doesn't it?"

"But it can't have happened," broke in Lucy, with decision. "Why, it isn't an hour since we had tea."

"Lots of things can happen in an hour,"

said Mary, with an abstracted air. "I used to believe that there were no such people as Fairies," she went on inconsequently.

"Do you—do you believe in them now, Mary?" asked Lucy in awestruck tones.

"I don't know what to think. It's very queer," was the guarded reply.

Again they paused, meditating, and then Lucy spoke, but scarcely above her breath.

"Who knows but what there are Fairies, and that they can punish us?"

"I wonder. You know we really are bad girls," remarked Mary, with much gravity. "And I daresay that Fairy spoke the truth when he said that Miss Harbutt was fond of us, and that we made mother cry."

"It's very likely, especially about mother crying. She can't bear to see us naughty," whispered Kitty, with a little sob.

"Well now, listen a moment," interrupted Mary, speaking earnestly. "Of course I am not going to say that we haven't dreamt all this, because I don't really believe there are such things as—"

She paused abruptly and listened, while Kitty drew closer to her.

“W—what’s that?”

“W—what’s what?” cried Lucy nervously.

“I—I—thought I heard a funny noise.”

“Then don’t say what you were going to say. P’r’aps it’s wicked,” begged Kitty.

“Then I won’t,” and Mary glanced round nervously. “But I tell you this. I mean to try and behave better.”

“So shall I,” said Lucy decidedly.

“And so shall I,” echoed Kitty.

“After all,” continued the elder girl, “if Miss Harbutt is strict, it’s because she has to be. And it does seem a shame to make mother unhappy. Let us give up talking like Freddy, because we can’t be boys, however much we try. And we’ll be nicer at lessons, won’t we?”

This course of action appeared so desirable that the children agreed to it at once, with a promptness which would have gladdened Miss Harbutt’s heart had she been there to hear it.

“You see,” Lucy explained, “this dream *might* be a sort of warning. And—” here she paused suddenly, and crossing on tiptoe to Mary’s side, whispered—“Goodness!

We've forgotten something," and then threw a glance in the direction of the screen.

"You—you mean—the dolls?" asked Mary below her heath.

"Call them Fairies, or they won't like it perhaps," murmured Kitty.

"I—I—wonder if they're still where we put them?" She was going to say "threw them," but thought better of it. "Go and look, Lucy."

"I don't like to. You go, Mary; you're the biggest."

After a slight hesitation Mary stole noiselessly to the screen and peeped cautiously behind it. Then she turned and nodded her head.

"Just the same?" asked Lucy very quietly.

"Just the same."

"Dress and everything?"

"Yes."

"Do you think they'll mind if we—if we touch them?" came from Kitty.

"I shouldn't think so, if we do it gently," was Mary's opinion.

"We can't leave them there—after all this."

“We’re too old for dolls,” observed Kitty with some return of confidence, “but we’ll be like mothers to them, even if people do laugh at us. If it hadn’t been for them we might have been toads at this moment. Bring them out, Mary.”

With the utmost care and gentleness, Mary picked up the poor battered dolls one by one, and handed them on to their respective owners. But Belinda she gathered closely to her and sat down, rocking the tattered plaything to and fro.

“I shan’t call her Belinda any more—but Wildrose, her proper name,” she said softly.

“And I shall call mine Primrose. It’s much prettier,” and Lucy kissed the cracked waxen cheeks.

“And mine shall be Mossrose. So like her, the darling—when her face is washed,” added Kitty, looking lovingly upon the doll.

“They ought to have a bath to-night,” continued Mary after a pause. “But they must be too tired, so we’ll just sing them to sleep and put them in our own beds. We’ll never beat you again, you poor dears,”

she crooned. "But you shall have beautiful dresses and nice cradles, and be taken out for walks, and petted and spoiled all your lives."

And so the three girls sat, each rocking her doll, and singing a lullaby very softly, until the dusk deepened, and mysterious shadows gathered in the corners of the room.

Then the key turned in the lock, and Miss Harbutt, looming very tall and very dignified, made her appearance.

Judging from her severe countenance, she expected to find her charges quiet, perhaps, but unsubdued; so that when Mary rose at her entrance and turned towards her a mild and penitent countenance, the good lady was not a little surprised.

"If you please, Miss Harbutt, we're—all—sorry," she continued slowly, finding the words rather hard to utter. "We—we—"

"Apologise," chimed in Lucy.

"Yes, that's it. We apologise, and we oughtn't to have been so naughty."

The governess glanced keenly at each girl, half suspecting that some fresh mischief lurked behind this submissive demean-

our. But the grave upturned faces drove away her suspicions, and she stooped and kissed each of them quite nicely.

"Then we won't say any more about it," she replied—"neither to mother nor any one else. And if only you would always ask pardon so prettily," she added, drawing Mary to her, "no one could help forgiving you at once."

"We mean to, if we're ever naughty again," replied Mary.

"But we never shall be naughty again," said Kitty, with decision.

"If we can help it," added the conscientious Lucy.

"You see, something very wonderful has happened," Mary went on mysteriously, "and we've found out lots of things that we didn't know before. So we've made up our minds to try and be good girls. Haven't we?"

The other two nodded a vigorous assent.

"You mustn't ask anything about it yet. But some day perhaps, we'll tell you what that wonderful thing is."

"Won't you tell me now?" asked Miss

Harbutt smiling; but Mary shook her head.

"You wouldn't believe us—nobody would," she said. "But there is just this we discovered. We always thought you didn't like us a bit; but one of the Fair—I mean somebody said that you—you loved us. Do you?"

"Of course I do—simpleton. Everyone loves you."

"Then somebody was right after all. So I want to ask"—and here the child looked up appealingly—"if we try to please you, would you mind shewing that you liked us a little more? It would be such a help to us, you can't think."

In a moment Kitty was on Miss Harbutt's knee, and the other girls were drawn gently to her side.

"You mustn't think that because I have to punish you and be severe that it is any pleasure to me," said the governess in a strangely soft voice. "I love you all too dearly for that. It is because I want you to grow up good and kind and unselfish that sometimes I seem harsh. Perhaps we haven't quite understood each other. You know now

that I love you very much; but I too like to be loved. Will you try, all of you?"

"We'll love you like anything if you'll always talk to us like that," answered Kitty, giving her a timid hug.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

Half an hour later the three rebels were lying fast asleep in their beds, each with her doll, clad in a spotless white nightdress, clasped tightly in her arms.

Miss Harbutt had undressed them and tucked them in, and Kitty, half asleep, had asked for another kiss.

"You are nice now," she murmured. "Perhaps, after all, you're another Fairy in disguise."

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